Adolescents’ Perspectives on Coping with Bullying in the Digital Environment

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Abstract: This study examined the coping process of adolescents in the construction of a sense of coherence after experiencing bullying events in the digital environment. The content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 20 adolescents aged 14 to 18 (M = 16.85) revealed three themes: (1) the comprehension of the bullying as stemming from hatred and boredom; (2) managing the bullying by turning to the bully asking that they stop, deleting and forgiving after the event, and coping through self-isolation and with the support of family and friends; and (3) the emotional processing of anger, embarrassment, and sadness. All the data correlated with the a priori themes of the salutogenic approach, demonstrating a significant expression of the components of a sense of coherence. Understanding the adolescents’ coping process and their construction of a sense of coherence following their experience of cyberbullying may help practitioners design and implement tailored interventions for adolescents and their educators who are increasingly confronted with this issue.

Keywords: cyberbullying; digital environment; coping; sense of coherence; adolescents; qualitative research

1. Introduction

1.1. Adolescents and Social Media

Currently an integral and central part of the lives of children and adolescents [1], social media are platforms that enable social connections, content creation, and the sharing of information [2]. Studies have found that 93% of children and adolescents use social media on a weekly basis and 60% use it daily. Social media such as Facebook and instant messaging software are thus critical tools in maintaining their social lives [3]. However, these platforms are also available to those who choose to use them cynically, exploitatively, and dangerously, as they are a powerful weapon for antisocial behavior, often resulting in severe harm with long-term consequences for the lives of many young people and their families. The scope of the dangers is endless and parallels the range of dangers found in the offline world [4], including the spread of hate speech, threats, rumors, and sexual harassment. The prevalence of this behavior in Europe stands at 20% of teens reporting harassment on social media [5]. Indeed, 15–20% of children and adolescents in Europe have reported feeling threatened, as well as distressed and uncomfortable, as a result of using social media [6].

1.2. Cyberbullying

Childhood and adolescence are not only periods of growth, but also of emerging risk-taking. Young people during these periods are particularly vulnerable and cannot fully understand the connection between behaviors and consequences [7]. The dark side of young people’s internet usage is that they may bully or suffer from others’ bullying in cyberspace [8]. Based on Olweus’s definition, cyberbullying is usually regarded as bullying implemented through electronic media [9,10]. Specifically, cyberbullying among children and adolescents can be summarized as the intentional and repeated harm from one or more
peers that occurs in cyberspace caused by the use of computers, smartphones, and other devices [11].

Cyberbullying may be perceived as more vicious than traditional bullying, as the attacks may be more intense and frequent in a way that does not raise suspicion. Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is difficult to stop because there is no way to curb bullies. Online bullies can be even more brutal than offline bullies because, in addition to words, they can incorporate a rich array of sounds, edited images, text, and videos into their attacks. Moreover, the perpetrators may hide under a cloak of anonymity, allowing them to easily attack others whenever and wherever they want [12]. The anonymous nature of the interaction and the speed of dissemination may further exacerbate the negative impact on their victims [13].

While traditional bullying tends to occur in places where the perpetrator and victim are geographically close, cyberbullying is mostly carried out remotely through the use of social media. Both types of bullying have emotional and behavioral consequences for the victims [14]. Cyberbullying is associated with negative emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, or fear, emotions that have been correlated with delinquency and interpersonal violence among adolescents and young adults [12].

A meta-analysis [7] found five schemes of online violence: verbal violence, group violence, visual violence, impersonation and forged accounts, and other behaviors which include sexual harassment. The findings of the current study indeed reflect these five types of violence, albeit expressed in various ways. As a review of the relevant literature indicates, sociality is a powerful weapon for antisocial behavior [5]. Often, the damage done on social media has long-term consequences on the lives of many young people and their families [4]. This finding affirms the understanding that adolescents who have experienced online abuse enter a state of continuous stress that triggers a need for coping and resilience resources.

The studies conducted so far on cyberbullying are mostly based on quantitative methodologies and focus on the nature of the harm, its causes, consequences, and frequency [7,15,16].

2. Theoretical Framework

The current study examined resources adolescents use to remain resilient when coping with the stress of cyberbullying. The theoretical perspective of resilience resources underpinning the study is constructed on the foundations of what is known as salutogenesis—the study of the origins of health. The salutogenic approach focuses on the psychological and sociocultural factors that help people sustain their psychological equanimity in the face of stressors and physical resilience to withstand illness [17]. Within this approach, we find the concept developed by Antonovsky known as sense of coherence (SOC), which reveals how one makes sense of one’s world, as this is considered a key component that can contribute to health and well-being [18]. The SOC scale has been found to be reliable and valid in cross-cultural research [19]. For Antonovsky, one’s SOC is “a pervasive feeling of confidence that the life events one faces are comprehensible, that one has the resources to cope with the demands of these events, and that these demands are meaningful and worthy of engagement” [18]. The SOC encompasses three components: (1) life is comprehensible, (2) life is manageable, and (3) life is meaningful [20,21]. Numerous studies throughout children’s developmental stages found SOC to be a significant predictor of children’s health and healthy behaviors [22]. SOC was also found to be a meaningful component of children’s scholastic success [23], and according to more recent studies, it has also been found to have a positive impact on adolescent mental health [24–27]. The decision to use SOC theory as a theoretical framework for the current study stems from its broad perspective, which encompasses cognitive, emotional, and practical aspects and because studies indicate that people with a strong SOC are less vulnerable to stress, as they possess a broad repertoire of coping resources and strategies and are sufficiently flexible and capable of choosing the most appropriate strategy for a given situation [28]. According to Braun-Lewensohn
et al. [29], sense of coherence might moderate stress experiences in adolescents, for example, stressors such as cyberbullying [30]. In the current study, the adolescent’s coping with cyberbullying is perceived as an uncertainty, a crisis, and a stressful situation. The SOC components guided the research questions and the research data analysis.

Thus, the current study aims to understand how adolescents understand, manage, and elaborate the bullying they experienced by analyzing their SOC. The innovation of the current study lies in highlighting the assessment of adolescents’ emotional processing in conjunction with comprehension and coping mechanisms in light of the salutogenic approach in order to reveal their sources of resilience to cope with this experience of cyberbullying. Hence, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do adolescents who experienced cyberbullying understand and build their comprehension of the harasser’s characteristics? (Comprehensibility)
2. What are the adolescent’s coping resources for promoting their sense of manageability? (Manageability)
3. What is their emotional meaning of the cyberbullying they experienced? (Meaning)

3. Methods

3.1. Research Population

Participants in the study were 20 adolescents aged 14 to 18 (M = 16.85). Of these, 50% (10) were girls and 50% (10) were boys. The participants were all native-born Israelis and spoke Hebrew as their first language. All participants had one or two siblings (M = 1.6). All participants underwent 2 to 12 (M = 4.8) cyberbullying events.

3.2. Sampling Method

As is commonly found in qualitative studies, the convenience method of sampling was used [26]. This was achieved by posting messages inviting adolescents to participate in the study on relevant social media groups focused on sharing the cyberbullying of adolescents in TikTok, Fakebook, and Instagram all over Israel, for those who had been victims of cyberbullying. A research assistant subsequently contacted the parents of the adolescents who volunteered to participate; at the end of this recruitment process, about 30% of the applicants were actually interviewed.

3.3. Research Tool

The semi-structured interview was selected as the most appropriate tool for documenting a meaningful experience to fully understand both the participants’ subjective experiences and the phenomenon under study. The semi-structured interview addresses predefined topics: a number of prepared questions are asked during the interview, to ensure that these topics are covered. However, the interviewer may also add other questions that become relevant in light of the interviewee’s responses. This format is both systematic and flexible, and thus can yield significantly comprehensive information. The interview questions followed 4 pilot interviews which informed the final set of questions used in the study in order to ensure the reliability of the interview instrument. The questions that were finally chosen were those that most effectively represented the research questions.

In the current study, the initial interactions with the adolescents were audio-recorded as were the interviews, each of which lasted approximately 40 min. The questions asked were the following:

- Tell me about your experience with cyberbullying. (Meaning)
- When did online bullying and harassment start for you?
- Could you please describe the incidents?
- When you were bullied, how did it make you feel? (Meaning)
- What did you do as a result? (Manageability)
- Describe who (adults or children) helped you get through the cyberbullying. How did they help?
○ What do you think caused this situation where children wrote such things to you? (Comprehensibility)
○ How was the bullying you experienced perceived by your immediate environment? (Comprehensibility)
○ What would you say to the person who hurt you?
○ Was there a particular event/moment that you remember most?
○ What was the role of your family during this period? (Manageability)
○ What helped you cope? (Manageability)
○ What message do you have for children and adults around this harassment on social media?

3.4. Research Procedure

Potential participants and the parents of those under 18 were given a clear explanation of the research procedure and its goals. The adolescents and the parents who agreed to their child’s participation in the study signed an informed consent form to have the interview recorded. Each adolescent was then interviewed by someone specifically trained for this purpose by a research supervisor, without their parents’ presence.

All interviews took place in Hebrew, the adolescents’ first language, and relevant quotes were later translated into English. Each interview took place in the afternoon in a quiet and private area at home, in order to enable a secure and trusting atmosphere.

3.5. Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the data obtained from the 20 interviews. The textual data were treated holistically, where the researchers read the full transcripts more than once and then performed a focused analysis, eliciting relevant quotes. The thematic analysis used SOC and the basis for the organization of the data. The content analysis applied the procedures suggested by Shkedi [31,32] as follows. Stage 1—open coding [31–33], in which data are gathered and categorized by theme, i.e., reoccurring major topics, often in line with the structured interview questions. Stage 2—mapping, in which categories are rearranged according to the new conceptual measures. In the current study, each analyzer reviewed five transcripts (approx. 25% of the data) to elicit a comprehensive and detailed overview of the findings and to identify sub-themes within the new categories. The analyzers’ findings were compared and discussed at each stage of the content analysis. Following this, the remaining interviews were analyzed according to the new categories and subthemes previously elicited. Stage 3—selective coding, in which a tree or hierarchy of the categories and themes is constructed and organized according to the development of the narrative.

The main researcher of the current study is a native Hebrew speaker and a child psychologist by profession. Her frequent encounters in therapy sessions with adolescents who had been subjected to cyberbullying was the catalyst to initiate research on their perspective of the phenomenon.

The main researcher and the research assistant analyzed the data separately at first and later on compared findings at each stage to ensure interrater reliability in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the reports and the interpretations thereof. The comparison of their findings demonstrated a 90% interrater reliability. However, it was the main researcher who wrote the research report.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted so as to ensure participants’ confidentiality. Shlasky and Alpert [34] maintain that any written record—as well as any observation of phenomena—can be consciously or subconsciously tainted with the observer’s ethical, political, and moral attitudes. Since, by definition, qualitative research involves an attempt to reconstruct reality, in this study, every effort was made to present the participants’ voices as authentically as possible. To achieve this, interviewees were given an opportunity to tell their stories
without interruption, and later their views were reported authentically and accurately via quotes, taking into account potential biases in light of the fact that the researcher and the second specialist were both married women.

All audio recordings were transcribed and will be erased at the end of three years. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Furthermore, the research was approved by the Institutional Ethics Board of the researchers’ college (Approval No. 0152). Finally, all the parents of minor participants signed an informed consent form regarding their child’s participation and the publishing of relevant findings, following a detailed explanation of the research and their rights prior to the beginning of each interview.

4. Results

The content analysis (following Shkedi [31]) of the 20 interview transcripts conducted with the adolescents regarding their experiences of cyberbullying revealed that they related to three aspects (see Figure 1): the comprehension of the bullying as stemming from hatred and boredom; managing by asking the bully to stop during the event, deleting and forgiving after the event, and coping through self-isolation and the support of family and friends; and the emotional processing of feelings of anger, embarrassment, and sadness.

Figure 1. Adolescents’ reaction to cyberbullying. The data analysis revealed that all data correlated with the a priori salutogenic approach themes, demonstrating the significant expression of the SOC components in the adolescents’ descriptions of their dealings with cyberbullying.

These findings will be demonstrated below according to the components.

4.1. Comprehension of the Bullying (Comprehensibility)

Comprehension of it as stemming from hatred and from boredom. On the one hand, 17 of the participants saw this as arbitrary, insensitive, and inconsiderate evil.
Evil

Yotam (m. 17) described the bully as an evil person: “... But mostly I think he’s evil. He really played with my heart, he manipulated me badly, he was really significant in my life and took advantage of it! He took advantage of it”.

Hannah (f. 16) shared her feelings: “I may be fat, but they are evil... and that’s much worse”.

Michaela (f. 15) also believed that bullies are evil people: “I don’t think, but just know that these are people, or rather very, very evil children and teenagers”.

On the other hand, 13 participants saw bullying as stemming from boredom, partly due to the COVID-19 lockdowns, and partly from boredom in general, independent of any external factor.

Amit (f. 17) believed that the bullying was done out of boredom: “I think they did it really out of boredom. During Corona there was a lockdown and people really had nothing to do, so out of boredom they decided to spend their time scattering traces of evil across the internet.

Maor (f. 15) said that out of boredom, people began to react badly to her: “I also think that somewhere they were really bored, and chose to find interest in me and my life... Maybe these are people who really don’t have anything useful to do and so they spend their free time on such negative things”.

Liran (f. 17) speculated that people were trying to find interest in her and her family: “If I have to speculate then I guess people just don’t have a life and are bored... They try to find interest in me, in my life and in my family”.

In conclusion, this theme reveals that there are participants who thought that bullying stemmed from boredom, while others thought that the bullying stemmed from malice. Interestingly, none of the participants saw or tried to examine their place within the interaction.

4.2. Managing (Manageability)

The following were the coping resources for promoting the adolescent’s sense of manageable.

4.2.1. Turning to the Bully: Asking Them to Stop during the Event

In this category, we found 16 adolescents who shared that they bravely approached the bullies directly in order to ask them to stop their hurtful behavior. The participants’ statements indicate that they chose this way of coping because they wanted to try a nice and polite way to end the bullying by appealing to the common sense of the bullies, lest they do not understand the severity of their actions, and out of a desire to give them another chance to change their ways before the bullying incident is reported, with ensuing harsh measures.

Naama (f. 18) described how she coped over a period of about three years, during which she was a victim of cyberbullying:

... No matter how much we tried to stop them, it just didn’t work... I wrote to them privately; both my mother and I wrote to them privately and they just made fun of us. They said it’s you who are shaming us, we didn’t do anything... We wrote to them that it was a shame that they behaved like this as adults...

Danit (f. 17) shared her repeated appeals to children in her class, in order to stop sharing the video: “I told them it wasn’t funny, and they should stop laughing about it and passing it on to other people...”

Michaela (F.18) took a brave step to stop the bullying comments:

I decided to post a video about it, I talked about these comments and really opened up about the whole thing with a clear goal—to ask anyone who has ever been a bully, whether it’s towards me or even if it’s for other bullies to stop. I was really trying to explain why it hurts and why it needs to be stopped.
4.2.2. Deleting after the Event

Fifteen participants who adopted this coping method indicated that the rationale for erasing the comments was their desire to remove the negative energy, as well as the desire to preserve their inner world in such a way that virtual space would not be polluted by negative reactions. In addition, for some of the participants, the deletion of the comments stemmed from the fear that friends in the virtual space would be exposed to these comments and this would provoke similar thoughts in them.

Liran (f. 18) spoke about the bullying she experienced and described her coping mechanism:

At first, I would delete the comments and block whoever wrote them. I said that my page is like a house, and just like I won’t let a bad person into my house, the same goes for my page, and that’s why I just deleted and blocked...

Yaheli (f. 16) shared that she deleted the bullying comments: “After they started commenting on my feed which is public, I would delete their comments from all my photos”.

Maor (f. 15) shared why she chose to delete the comments: “...At some point, I started deleting them. I think it bothered me that it was so public, and that people would see what others were writing about me and maybe start thinking that way too”.

4.2.3. Forgiveness after the Event

Twelve participants described their readiness to forgive the offender today, retrospectively after some time had passed. Shai (f. 17) expressed her forgiveness to the offender: “Today I’m in a place where I forgive because I think she’s a little person, but I’ll always remember how she made me feel and the difficult time I went through because of her”.

Ravit (f. 18) shared the following:

I wish him better days, surrounded by people who will love and forgive him. I hope he finds love, unconditional love, happiness. It is forbidden to wish bad things on people, and besides, thank God, I found my answer and I wish everyone to be happy with what they have and spread only good. I forgave and moved on.

Hannah (f. 18) shared that she forgives and even feels sorry for the bullies:

Today I am in an amazing place with myself so that I forgive them. Just like that. Forgiving and... I’ll even say more than that... that... somewhere I even have some compassion for them, because they’re definitely not perfect and they’ve grown crooked if that’s their behavior... I wish them to experience only successes and that jealousy should not control them.

4.2.4. Coping

Social Isolation

The analysis of the findings revealed that 15 adolescents mentioned seclusion as a coping mechanism during their journey. Their reasons for the seclusion included a desire to take a “time out” from social media, while examining the question of how to move forward. In some cases, isolation was also expressed as physical seclusion at home, in addition to disconnection from virtual spaces. The isolation often stemmed from the feeling that they could no longer bear the bullying, and therefore they disconnected out of a conscious choice for a certain period of time.

Naama (f. 18) shared that she posted a video on TikTok, in which she asked her grandfather for forgiveness for not going to his grave, following which she received harsh responses:

I uploaded a video and it just had so many comments and so much hate around it, that I just couldn’t stand it. I just closed the app and didn’t leave the house. Throughout the evening, Kippur and the fast itself, I didn’t leave the house, because they also said that if they saw me on the street, they would throw all kinds of things at me, and stuff... So I was even more afraid.
Inbal (f. 17) shared the feelings that led to her not leaving the house for two weeks: “I felt like I couldn’t show my face at school anymore. I also wouldn’t leave the house for about two weeks, I was just in total shock, shocked, it was so embarrassing”.

Yotam (m. 17) spoke about his feelings following his ordeal, when he discovered that he had fallen victim to an imposter who deceived him online:

First of all, I didn’t leave the house for a few days. I told my mother I was sick and didn’t feel well, and I stayed home and didn’t go to school. I felt like I needed some time to myself to process everything I was going through.

Family Support

Fourteen adolescents spoke about the family support they received, some from their parents and some also or alternatively from their siblings. They described how much this support meant to them.

Shai (f. 16) described the support she received from her mother:

My mother, who knew, really was my mainstay at the time. I think if I hadn’t told her, it would have ended very differently. She really strengthened me; we have a good relationship. She was there for me to remind me of what I was worth.

Hannah (f. 18) shared that she understands how important and significant her parents were: “They supported me in their own way. . . They gave me the space I needed. When I look at my parents, I realize what amazing parents they are”.

Dana (f. 17) shared that her sister encouraged her after someone posted pictures of her, laughing at her for being hairy: “… My older sister… She helped me overcome a bit, she encouraged me and told me that there was nothing a laser couldn’t solve, and that she would also do my eyebrows…”

Friend Support

Mia (f. 18) spoke of the friend who supported her:

There were times when I felt sad, then a friend of mine would cheer me up with ice cream or something sweet, and it’s those little things that make you forget even just for a minute all the noise around you.

Mai (f. 18) shared that her friends tried to reflect the truth to her and empower her: “They mostly empowered me very, very much, and also said that what was written there was not true. . . They tried very, very hard to show me that what was written there was not what was true”.

Amit (f. 15) spoke of the support her girlfriends gave her: “Shaked and Noya, my best friends, really tried to be there for me, to make me happy. It really warmed my heart to know that I had someone to lean on”.

4.3. Emotional Processing (Meaning)

This theme deals with the participants’ emotional meaning of the cyberbullying they experienced.

The most prominent emotions were anger, embarrassment, and sadness. The anger arose as a result of the experience of the hurt and was expressed both actively and passively. Sadness was usually expressed in crying, and often included a more complex experience of depression, as part of the range of emotions. Embarrassment arose as a result of the feelings of participants who expressed themselves on social media, and as a result, parts of their personality were exposed to others, and therefore they felt judged.

4.3.1. Anger

Twelve adolescents mentioned the anger they felt following the harm, mainly that they did not understand why this reaction came, they saw it as harm without any justification. Michaela (f. 15) shared with us:
At first, I was very angry. I don’t think it’s anyone’s business in the world to comment on how I look or behave. Obviously, it annoyed me, I post really interesting, funny, cool things. Comment on my content, on matter-of-fact things. Do you have a problem with how I wear makeup or talk? Like I felt it was really repulsive.

Ravit (f. 17) shared the anger she felt towards the people who made hateful comments: “Getting such comments from the same girl over and over can be really annoying. I was really angry, why are you wasting so much time of your life to make me feel bad? Like what’s your thing?”

Tali (f. 18) shared a feeling of severe anger she felt towards her former best friend: 

I was very angry with her, as if “first you murder and then you want to inherit?!” What right do you have to be the one who gets hurt and angry here and still do all the things you do to me on Instagram while you steal my boyfriend... The world has gone crazy...

Really without the slightest shame...

4.3.2. Embarrassment

Eleven adolescents spoke of the embarrassment they felt at the fear of being seen in public both virtually and in person.

Danit (f. 16) spoke of the feeling of embarrassment that surrounded her following a video she uploaded to YouTube:

I was really embarrassed, and the truth is that I forgot that this video even existed. They laughed at me and called me Danit (pseudonym) the musician. At first it didn’t really offend me but then they told some other friends of theirs and just all day they came and harassed me with this video.

Ravit (f. 18) shared her fear that others would see the comments and described that it would be embarrassing for her: “In the end, there is also something a little embarrassing about this, I was embarrassed to see these reactions about me and for others to see this”.

Inbal (f. 17) shared that out of embarrassment, she chose to switch schools after her ex-boyfriend circulated intimate photos of her: “I couldn’t bear the fact that I was supposed to go back to school and show myself there. It’s the most embarrassing thing in the world and I really couldn’t even imagine it in my head”.

4.3.3. Sadness

Eleven adolescents shared the sadness they felt following the hurt; sadness that included insult, a sense of emptiness, and heartbreak.

Mai (f. 18) spoke of the sadness she felt following the bullying:

It’s even a little bit of sadness... which... you’re like... you invest, you bother... I bought a special camera and lighting, and you arrange it and you shoot it and you edit it and you think about things, and it’s working on anything like that... It’s work that takes hours. It’s literally hours, and it’s like you’re putting it on the air, like a baby like that and you’re like, “Wow, I invested and it turned out pretty good!”

Yotam (m. 15) shared the sadness he experienced: “I felt broken, like a kind of heartbreak, I felt this sense of sadness and emptiness, just constant sadness”.

Maor (m. 16) said the following: “The truth is that mostly I was very offended. It really hurt me a lot and caused me a lot of grief, such sadness...”

The emotions that the adolescents shared were harsh and difficult to process.

5. Discussion

The current study examined the coping process of adolescents and their construction of a sense of coherence (SOC) after experiencing bullying events in the digital environment.

The study was based on the salutogenic theory [18] which was used as an overarching theory according to which the data in this study were analyzed and conceptualized. This approach made it possible to examine the components of the adolescents’ coherence, which were deductively placed in advance, and to understand the unique contents regarding the
comprehensibility, manageability, and significance among adolescents who experienced cyberbullying. The innovation of the research is its highlighting of the assessment of adolescents’ emotional processing in conjunction with comprehension and coping mechanisms in light of the salutogenic approach in order to reveal their sources of resilience. The adolescents’ SOC was found to consist of comprehension of the bullying as stemming from hatred and boredom. The adolescents were found to manage the bullying by asking the bully to stop during the event, by deleting and forgiving after the event, and by coping through self-isolation and receiving support from family and friends. Finally, their emotional processing included feelings of anger, embarrassment, and sadness.

As teenagers, Generations Z and Alpha spend much of their social lives online. Regarding the origin of cyberbullying, Lee [35] notes that victims of cyberbullying are mostly harassed by classmates (31.8%), followed by those outside of school (11.4%). A significant number of adolescents (15.9%) are bullied from multiple sources, and many of them do not know the identity of the bully (40.9%). As technology continues to advance and becomes increasingly available in less developed countries, the number of people affected by cyberbullying is expected to increase [13]. Moreover, cyberbullying has an aspect of repetition, which is quite complex; one act of cyberbullying can easily create a ‘snowball’ and be out of the bully’s initial control, due to the technology used [34]. The current study shows that adolescents find their sources of resilience through an attempt to understand how the harassers get to a place where they do inappropriate things, from a place of making room for processing difficult and burdensome emotions, by dealing with the harassers themselves and by being surrounded by family and friends, and sometimes also through withdrawal and solitude.

5.1. Emotional Processing of Bullying in the Digital Environment

Earlier studies found a significant correlation between cyber-victimization and depression [36,37]. A recent meta-analysis [38] found that the odds of depression among cyber-victims were almost three-fold higher (OR = 2.73; 95% CI 2.25–3.31) compared to non-cyber-victims. In the current study, the innovation lies in the adolescents’ direct and authentic sharing of their emotional processing, a different source of information that emerged during semi-structured interviews. The emotions of post-cyberbullying anger, embarrassment and sadness that arose during the interviews reflect the profound impact of online harassment on adolescents’ emotional and psychological state. Recognizing and addressing these emotions are crucial for helping adolescents cope with and overcome the trauma of cyberbullying, foster resilience, and promote a safer and more inclusive online environment for all.

It seems that the adolescents themselves are aware of their harsh emotional condition, but this is only part of their SOC. They also shared their comprehension and managing. This is in light of the salutogenic approach pioneered by sociologist Aaron Antonovsky [39,40], which focuses on the healthy side of the health/illness continuum. SOC, a core principle of salutogenesis, expresses the degree to which a person experiences a dynamic but enduring feeling about internal and external stimuli and stressors in their environment [41] (pp. 76–88). In the current study, we have revealed a wider range of consequences to cyberbullying besides the harsh feelings, as adolescents shared their comprehension and managing of this challenging situation.

5.2. Coping Strategies after Experiencing Cyberbullying

According to Lazarus [42], emotional situations are mainly managed by two mechanisms: coping strategies and emotional processes. The stress that comes with experiencing cyberbullying as an adolescent arouses harsh and overwhelming feelings that might put their well-being at risk. Coping strategies are intended to change an undesirable situation, whereas emotional processes can take the form of either avoidance or reassessment of the situation (ibid.). In the current study, the coping strategies that arose combined two contradicting coping strategies: isolation on the one hand, and seeking support from family
and friends on the other. It seems that the adolescents in the study may be employing a mix of coping strategies, including isolation and seeking support, in order to deal with the stress of cyberbullying. This combination reflects a complex approach to managing their emotions and the situation.

5.3. Adolescents’ Education to Manage the Digital Environment

The adult world in general, and the education system in particular, mistakenly believe that they have no place or role for teaching behavior on social networks [43]. True, in technological management, these generations are usually much more advanced than their teachers, but in social, emotional, interpersonal, and educational considerations, adolescents have much to learn about social media behavior [44]. The social problems and bullying revealed in reports of the networks are very serious [37], and the education system has a very significant role to play in this matter [43], in order to prevent the severe cases of bullying that teenagers experience in their social lives. An earlier systematic research review, examining the effectiveness of educational interventions in reducing the frequency of cyberbullying and cyber victimization among adolescents, found that such programs were more effective when delivered by technology-savvy content experts rather than by teachers [45].

This study is significant since; on the one hand, it shows how adolescents describe coping from their perspective, and how they construct their resilience through their SOC. On the other hand, we must learn how specially trained educators can assist, mediate, and promote the adolescents’ sources of resilience both in terms of preventing incidents and in terms of how supporting and offering tools for building resilience when experiencing cyberbullying.

5.4. Parental Role in Adolescents’ Coping with Cyberbullying

While parents may critically influence the reduction of adolescent risk-taking, adolescents’ access to online spaces presents significant and novel challenges to parents’ ability to reduce their children’s involvement in cyberbullying [46]. In the current study, the adolescents shared their need for parental support when coping with cyberbullying. This need is a very important issue. In general, adolescents are less inclined to share social struggles with their parents, and in this context, it is interesting that in the current study, they themselves mentioned their need for parental support. In addition, the study suggests that the alternative to this support is social support or social seclusion. Thus, in this context, the parental role is highly significant [47].

Parents need to be aware of adolescents’ need for their support. In order for this to really happen in a meaningful way, they need to be interested in their children’s online lives, and they also need to understand the place of social media in their adolescent child’s life and accompany their child in this area.

5.5. Research Limitations

This study had a few limitations. The current sample is limited due to the difficulty of recruiting participants willing to talk about this sensitive issue, thereby negatively affecting the ability to generalize the findings. In addition, we did not ask about important variables such as social status, family characteristics, the degree of religious observance, and cultural ascription. Future research should examine in what manner these variables are associated with each other in different societies. Furthermore, we did not look for unique characteristics of the adolescents’ narrative according to their gender. Finally, we did not ask about the number of hours the adolescents spent daily in the digital environment.

5.6. Future Research

It is worthwhile examining the effect of sociodemographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, family support, and the degree of religious observance on adolescents’ attitudes towards cyberbullying. Moreover, given the qualitative nature of the current
study, future research might use mixed methods, such as quantitative SOC questionnaires in combination with qualitative methods, to examine how adolescents cope with cyberbullying and analyze their levels of anxiety, hope, and trust. Furthermore, it is worth assessing additional outcomes beyond SOC, such as mental health, social adjustment, and academic performance, to understand the broader impact of cyberbullying. These findings could then be cross-referenced with those of the current study in order to elicit any differences in how the adolescents coped, how these differences manifested, and whether they affect adolescents of various ages in a different manner. Such research would contribute to the ongoing, global effort to develop resilience among adolescents, in particular in the area of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the current study established a new research model for the study of coping with cyberbullying based on the SOC components. It would be worthwhile to further examine the SOC components and to better understand each of them. For example, the adolescents shared their family support as a part of building their resilience, and it would be helpful to study how that parental support in cyberbullying was actually effective and resilience-promoting.

5.7. Clinical and Educational Implications

Findings from the current study might be used to underpin salutogenic and other supportive programs designed for adolescents, their parents, and their teachers to help strengthen their SOC by offering appropriate mediation, a sense of adult availability, and means to manage the cyberbullying.

Our findings suggest that adolescents undergo challenging emotional experiences in the digital environment, and thus need the support of their family and their teachers. We suggest offering group or individual educational and psychological interventions to support the adolescents’ coping with cyberbullying. Furthermore, we offer a preventive attitude in conducting instruction workshops to advise how to manage and cope adequately with cyberbullies. Moreover, teachers and educational counselors should receive adequate professional guidance regarding their involvement in mentoring adolescents’ managing and coping when faced with cyberbullying. The education system has to prioritize working with adolescents at three levels of intervention: the first is the preventive level, in which teachers have to conduct lessons and school activities, which will prevent cyberbullying through experiential activities. The second level is the personal accompaniment of any adolescents who undergo a cyberbullying event. Here, the teacher has to offer help and assistance in managing and coping with the cyberbullying according to the sources of resilience that have emerged in the current study in terms of understanding, managing, and emotional processing. For comprehensibility, this means helping adolescents understand the nature and dynamics of cyberbullying. It includes educating them about what cyberbullying is, how it manifests in various forms online, its potential impact on mental health, and strategies for identifying and recognizing cyberbullying behaviors. For manageability, the focus is on providing adolescents with practical strategies and skills to cope with and respond to cyberbullying incidents effectively. This may involve teaching them how to safely navigate online spaces, utilize privacy settings and block/report features on social media platforms, seek support from trusted adults or professionals, and develop assertiveness and resilience to handle cyberbullying situations. Finally, at the emotional level, it means delving into the emotional impact of cyberbullying on adolescents and helping them explore and process their feelings, thoughts, and experiences associated with the incidents. It involves validating their emotions, facilitating open communication about their experiences, addressing any feelings of shame, guilt, or fear, and promoting self-esteem, self-worth, and self-care practices to foster emotional well-being and recovery. By comprehensively addressing these three levels, professionals can provide holistic support to adolescents affected by cyberbullying, helping them navigate through the challenges and build resilience to thrive despite their experiences.
Finally, the third level is the class level, for which the teacher has to lead a collective condemnation and a common class support for the adolescent who undergoes a cyberbullying event.

5.8. Conclusions

The implications of these findings are significant for theory, research, and practice. The application of the salutogenic framework provides a nuanced understanding of adolescents’ coping mechanisms and resilience in the face of cyberbullying. This underscores the importance of incorporating a strengths-based approach in interventions aimed at addressing cyberbullying and promoting adolescent well-being. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the existing literature by elucidating the intricate interplay between adolescents’ SOC, coping strategies, and emotional processing within the context of cyberbullying. Future research endeavors could further explore these dynamics and their implications for adolescent development and mental health outcomes. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of fostering supportive environments within families, schools, and communities to bolster adolescents’ resilience and mitigate the negative consequences of cyberbullying. Interventions should focus not only on addressing the behavioral manifestations of cyberbullying but also on equipping adolescents with the necessary skills to cope effectively with emotional distress and cultivate a sense of coherence in the face of adversity. In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of adolescents’ experiences with cyberbullying and offers valuable insights for theoretical development, empirical research, and practical interventions aimed at promoting adolescent well-being in the digital era.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Achva Academic College (protocol code 0152 and approval date is: 20 November 2022).

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