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## EMPIRICAL ARTICLE

# Coping strategies in response to peer victimization: Comparing adolescents in the United States and Korea

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## Abstract

We examined cultural specificity in how adolescents' coping strategies in response to peer victimization are associated with adjustment with a sample of 7th–8th graders from the United States ( $n=292$ , 60% female,  $M_{\text{age}}=13.6$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) and South Korea ( $n=462$ , 50.2% female,  $M_{\text{age}}=13.7$ ,  $SD=0.58$ ). Participants read scenarios describing victimization and rated the likelihood of utilizing different coping strategies. US adolescents rated conflict resolution, cognitive distancing, and revenge higher than Korean adolescents, while Korean adolescents endorsed social support seeking more than US adolescents. Social support seeking was positively associated with global self-worth in both countries; however, social support seeking was negatively related to depression and social anxiety only for Korean youth.

## KEYWORDS

coping strategies, cross-cultural, depression, social anxiety, victimization

## INTRODUCTION

Peer victimization, or being intentionally targeted and harmed through peer's aggressive acts, is detrimental for adolescents' well-being. Past studies have found robust links between peer victimization and internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety, and lower global self-worth, both concurrently and longitudinally in the global West and East (Casper & Card, 2017; Christina et al., 2021; Kwon, 2011; Liao et al., 2022). Adolescence is a period of increased risk for potential peer concerns, as bullying behaviors increase in late childhood and peak during early adolescence (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Nylund et al., 2007). Because adolescence is also when social status and peer acceptance gain prominence, peer harassment can be especially salient and detrimental to adolescent mental health (Goemans et al., 2023). Moreover, at entry to middle school, friendship maintenance may be disrupted (Lessard & Juvonen, 2018), and experiencing peer relationship difficulties in addition to losing friendships can pose extra challenges in making the transition to the middle school environment.

One means through which peer victimization is related to adjustment difficulties is via youth's coping strategies

(Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Undheim et al., 2016). Coping responses to victimization in non-Western cultures have been underexplored, even though appropriate coping strategies may vary across cultures (e.g., Ma & Bellmore, 2016a). Moreover, coping strategies are interrelated; individuals endorse multiple strategies, not just one, yet few studies examine coping strategies simultaneously. The primary aims of the current study were to examine how multiple coping strategies were uniquely related to adjustment and to extend the investigation of coping strategies to another cultural group, Korean adolescents.

## Coping strategies in response to peer victimization

When exposed to stressful situations, individuals may choose different types of coping strategies that vary in their effectiveness (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). Kochenderfer-Ladd (2004) conceptualized children's coping responses to peer victimization into four strategies: cognitive distancing, revenge, conflict resolution, and social support seeking. Since then, much work has been done by Western researchers

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to better understand these coping strategies and their relations to peer victimization. Cognitive distancing is an avoidant response where victimized youth attempt to cope with victimization by pretending as if it did not happen. With this strategy, American youth may feel that they have failed to prevent interpersonal conflicts leading to a sense of helplessness (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). Youth who are targets of victimization may use more avoidance coping than nonvictims (Hampel et al., 2009). Further, avoidance coping has been associated with increase in depression and suicidal ideation in European adolescents (Benatov et al., 2020) and with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety in American emerging adults over time (Grant et al., 2013).

In contrast, revenge is an aggressive strategy that has been associated with increased aggression and social anxiety in victims in the United States through overt expression of negative affect (McDonald & Asher, 2018; Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010). According to findings in the United States and Europe, such aggressive responses to peer provocation are deemed maladaptive as they contribute to continuation and exacerbation of harassment (Elledge et al., 2010; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004), increased loneliness (Erath et al., 2019), and intensified depressive symptoms (Machmutow et al., 2013).

On the other hand, approach coping strategies that are aimed directly at stopping victimization are generally more adaptive. Approach coping, like conflict resolution and social support seeking, has been associated with fewer internalizing problems in American and Canadian children (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Shelley & Craig, 2010) and lower levels of depressive symptoms and social anxiety in European youth (Benatov et al., 2020; Machmutow et al., 2013; Ștefan, 2019). However, there are mixed findings regarding the positive effects of social support seeking. For example, a study in the United States found social support seeking was negatively correlated with peer victimization, suggesting that more frequent experiences of peer victimization may discourage youth from seeking out support or that youth who are able to seek support are less likely to experience peer victimization (Spiekerman et al., 2021). However, in another study, among American youth transitioning to middle school, social support seeking predicted higher peer victimization as reported by teachers (Erath et al., 2019).

### Cross-cultural variability in adolescent coping strategies in response to peer victimization

Stress is experienced universally; however, an individual's choice of coping strategies may differ across cultures and may be differentially predictive of adjustment outcomes depending on the culture. Chun et al.'s (2006) cultural transactional theory of stress and coping presents the stress and coping process as interactive transactions between person and environment embedded in broader culture. Chen et al. posit that the prevailing values of a cultural group are likely to influence individuals' choice of coping strategies, as well

as the goals of their coping efforts and the eventual outcomes of their coping.

Western researchers have been actively investigating adaptive coping responses to peer conflicts and developing prevention programs to promote competence in peer interactions (Evans et al., 2014). However, adolescents' coping responses to peer victimization are underexplored in Korea. Interventions in Korea could potentially benefit from research findings in the United States, but whether adaptive coping strategies in the United States will also be similarly beneficial for Korean youth is unclear due to differences in social cognition and social norms between the two cultures.

Although South Korea's industrialized market economy shares similar capitalistic values with the United States, the culture is oriented around interdependence and group harmony (Bahns et al., 2019; Lee & Choi, 2018). Contrastingly, more independence-oriented societies like the United States prioritize the development of a unique self (Kagitcibasi, 2017). Individuals with an interdependent self-construal (e.g., Koreans) define themselves in terms of important social relationships and value the ability to modify oneself to fit the demands of different situations. With an independent self-construal (e.g., Americans), individuals define themselves in terms of stable internal traits and prioritize assertiveness and self-consistency (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Based on these cultural differences, Chun et al. (2006) hypothesized that individuals in individualistic cultures tend to utilize coping strategies that involve directly confronting and modifying external stressors, while individuals in collectivistic cultures are more likely to rely on coping strategies aimed at regulating their own emotional states. Indeed, such differences in cultural orientations are reflected in past findings on coping responses.

Ma and Bellmore (2016a) interviewed Taiwanese and US adolescents about their coping strategies for peer victimization. They found that the main goal of Taiwanese adolescents' coping was to seek and restore social connection. They were willing to acknowledge that peer victimization was upsetting and sought support from friends, which also reestablished social connection and regained psychological safety. Contrastingly, US adolescents were less willing to show that victimization upset them. Instead, they sought self-integrity and independence by focusing on calming down. Furthermore, although both problem-solving and social support seeking strategies were protective, social support seeking had greater buffering effects from loneliness and depression in Taiwanese youth than US youth (Ma et al., 2018). Even within the United States, youth with Asian heritage used social support seeking more frequently compared to other strategies (Yeh & Inose, 2002).

With regard to adolescents in Korea specifically, there does not seem to be any investigation of social support seeking behaviors. However, evidence suggests that having access to social support is important for Korean youth's well-being. Among Korean middle and high school students, lower social support was predictive of higher suicide ideation (Kang, 2014). In addition, being cyberbullied led

to lower perceived social support by Korean youth which in turn increased social anxiety in them (Chung, 2015).

As past findings demonstrate, seeking social support aligns with Asian cultural norms, while coping by attempting to more directly mitigate the problems aligns with Western cultural norms. This is similar to how buffering effects of coping strategies differed for boys and girls based on whether the strategy violated gender norms or not (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). It may be that individuals are more likely to endorse coping that aligns with the cultural norms of the society they are included in. Likewise, it may be how norm-abiding a coping strategy is in a particular culture that influences its effectiveness on adjustment outcomes.

## The contexts of peer victimization in the United States and South Korea

Like Taiwan, South Korea is more collectivistic compared to the United States, which is more individualistic (Pelham et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2006). Collectivistic characteristics are found in peer victimization in South Korea as well. The most popular term used by students to indicate peer victimization is *wang-ta* which is a combination of two words *wang*, which means king or supreme, and *ta(tta)dolim*, where “*ta-*” comes from, means to ostracize. Together, *wang-ta* means extreme ostracization of a particular individual by a group of people. In school settings, the targets of *wang-ta* are ostracized by their peers in class, whom they stay with for every class for the entire school year, leaving the targets with no friends (Han et al., 2022). Because many Korean youth tend to view victims of *wang-ta* as someone that do not fit into a group (Lee et al., 2012), victims may be pressured to find ways to fit in with the group and create or maintain social connections with peers as their coping response. They also may be more reluctant to speak out against peer victimization (i.e., conflict resolution). Considering Confucianism's heavy influence on Korean culture and its focus on family ties, Korean youth may be more likely to seek help and support from family members as well (Kim et al., 2012). In contrast, in the United States there is more emphasis on assertiveness and standing up for oneself, which may promote use of more direct conflict resolution strategies instead (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Furthermore, there are several differences in classroom structures in South Korea and the United States during middle school that should be considered. Korean middle school students continue to have class-based lessons with the same group of peers in their homeroom for the entire school year, unlike in the United States, where there is intermixing of new peers in each class. Such classroom settings in Korea may reinforce the focus on preservation of relationships. In both the United States and Korea, the most notable common change that happens during the transition to middle school is that students interact with different teachers that specialize in a subject. However, Korean students still receive personal attention and monitoring from their homeroom

teachers as well, while the interaction with teachers becomes more impersonal in US middle schools (Duchesne et al., 2012). Thus, successfully finding social support may be more challenging for US youth. On the other hand, taking each class with a different group of peers may mean the level of ostracization may not be as extreme for victimized youth in the United States as they may have time away from their aggressors during school. Thus, due to these environmental factors as well as dominant cultural values that emphasize independence, US youth may not prioritize seeking social support upon experiencing peer victimization but may rather seek to stand up for themselves.

## Gender differences in coping strategies

The effectiveness of a coping strategy may also vary by the child's gender. Societal norms often discourage boys from displaying sadness and fear, while emphasizing dominance and assertiveness (Chaplin, 2015), whereas girls are often socialized to prioritize interpersonal relationships and are more likely to express their emotions openly (Leaper, 2015). Moreover, the social contexts in which boys and girls interact can differ, leading to varying expectations and responses (Yeh et al., 2009). Due to these gender differences in socialization, when handling peer victimization, boys and girls may prefer different coping strategies (Cava et al., 2021). For instance, girls may be more inclined than boys to ask for help. Moreover, such strategy may be more effective for girls as peers' support more strongly predicted lower internalizing behaviors in Canadian girls compared to boys (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2019). In contrast, boys are more prone to retaliate physically, and therefore, less likely to ask for help from others compared to girls (Cava et al., 2021).

Studies on gender differences in coping responses to peer victimization are scarce in Korea. Gender socialization in Korea is similar to the United States; therefore, a similar pattern of coping strategy endorsement by gender is expected (Lee & Choi, 2018). However, due to the more group-oriented nature of classrooms in Korea, social support seeking may be equally important for both Korean boys and girls.

## The current study

Considering that the cross-cultural comparison of adolescents' coping strategies in response to victimization is limited, we aimed to add to the literature by comparing coping strategies and their relations to adjustment outcomes between US and Korean youth. We were interested in whether Ma and Bellmore's findings (2016a) regarding Taiwanese youth's coping strategies would be replicated in Korean youth. We considered the relations of coping with adjustment while controlling for how relational and overt victimization were related to depression, anxiety, and self-worth. We thought it important to control for these forms of victimization separately because they are related to adjustment in distinct ways

and may have unique relationships with coping strategies (Casper & Card, 2017). Additionally, we considered multiple coping strategies simultaneously in the model to examine the associations between each coping strategy with victimization and outcomes while controlling for the effects of other strategies, reasoning that youth may use more than one coping strategy to deal with victimization, but there may be some that are more predictive of adjustment than others. We included depression, social anxiety, and global self-worth as indicators of intrapersonal adjustment, partly because all three have been associated with peer victimization in past studies (e.g., Christina et al., 2021; Graham & Juvonen, 1998) and partly because these constructs contain components of negative affect, distress, and self-understanding, each of which is affected by victimization (Biggs et al., 2010; Leeuwis et al., 2015; Rosen et al., 2007).

We formulated the following hypotheses:

**H1.** We hypothesized that Korean youth's preferred coping response would employ social relationships, resulting in Korean youth endorsing social support seeking the most, and that US youth would endorse conflict resolution the most as it may demonstrate their independence and assertiveness.

**H2.** We expected both social support seeking and conflict resolution would predict better adjustment outcomes in both groups.

**H3.** However, we predicted that social support seeking would be more strongly associated with adjustment for Korean youth compared to US adolescents (H3a), while conflict resolution would have stronger associations with adjustment outcomes for US youth compared to Korean youth (H3b).

**H4.** We expected the effects of social support seeking would be more strongly related to internalizing problems in girls than boys in both countries.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 7th and 8th graders from public schools in Seoul and urban cities of Gyeonggi Province in South Korea and from private schools in suburban cities in the Southern region of the United States. In both countries, letters describing the study and asking for parental consent for youth's participation were sent home to parents of all 7th and 8th grade students at cooperating schools. Students that received parental consent were then asked for their assent to participate in the study on the first day of data collection. The Korean

sample included 463 students (50.2% self-identified as girls, 55% 8th grade,  $M_{\text{age}} = 13.7$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ) that self-identified as Korean (96.8%), Southeast Asian (0.9%), multiracial (1.3%), other race (0.2%), or did not respond (0.9%). Korean participants reported their subjective socioeconomic status to be middle to upper class (MacArthur Scale  $M = 6.1$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ , median = 6.0, scale range = 1–10, observed range = 2–10).

The US sample comprised 292 students (60% self-identified as girls, 55.5% 8th grade,  $M_{\text{age}} = 13.6$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) and self-identified as White/Caucasian (79.5%), African American/Black (4.8%), Hispanic (3.8%), American Indian/Alaska native (1.0%), Asian (0.7%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.7%), other race or ethnic minority group (1.4%), or did not respond (7.9%). US participants felt that they were of middle to upper class socioeconomically (MacArthur Scale  $M = 6.4$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ , median = 6.0, scale range = 1–10, observed range = 2–10).

### Procedure

The study was approved by the ethics boards at the University of Alabama in the United States and at Yonsei University in South Korea. Adolescents with parental consent who assented completed paper-and-pencil measures described below. Participants received a small gift as compensation.

### Measures

#### Coping strategies

To assess coping strategies, the *When Bad Things Happen in School* questionnaire (WBTH; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004) was used. The WBTH consists of four subscales: conflict resolution (five items, e.g., “tell the kid to stop”; “take some time to cool off before responding”), cognitive distancing (five items, e.g., “make believe nothing happened”; “try to forget it ever happened”), advice and support (four items, e.g., “get help or advice from a family member”; “tell the teacher what happened”), and revenge (four items, e.g., “ask a friend to help you get back at the kid”; “want to hurt the kid in some way”). Participants read scenarios describing victimization and reported what they would do in such situation. They rated each item on a 3-point scale from 0 (*no, would not do that*) to 2 (*definitely do that*). The questionnaire was translated and back-translated by three independent translators fluent in both Korean and English. The internal reliability of the scales was good (United States  $\alpha = .748-.800$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .710-.774$ ).

#### Peer victimization

Peer victimization experiences were assessed using the following two subscales from the *Children's Social Experiences Questionnaire-Self Report* (CSEQ-SR; Crick & Grotpeter, 1996):

relational victimization (five items; e.g., “How often does a classmate tell lies about you to make other kids not like you anymore?”), overt victimization (five items; e.g., “How often does another kid kick you or pull your hair?”). In Korea, the CSEQ-SR translated by Choi and Lim (1999) was used. Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). All subscales have demonstrated high internal reliability in past studies (Crick & Grotpeter, 1996). For this study, relational and overt victimization scales demonstrated good internal reliability (Overt victimization: United States  $\alpha = .809$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .801$ ; Relational victimization: United States  $\alpha = .860$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .760$ ).

## Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured using the 11-item *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale for Children* (CES-DC). The Korean version translated by Boo et al. (2016) was used. Participants rated items such as “I felt lonely, like I didn’t have any friends” on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*) regarding how much they had felt a certain way the previous week. The CES-DC has demonstrated good internal consistency for adolescents in the United States (Faulstich et al., 1986) and in Korea (Kim & Min, 2006). The internal reliability of the scale was high (United States  $\alpha = .855$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .893$ ).

## Social anxiety

Social anxiety was measured using items from the *Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised* (La Greca & Stone, 1993) and *Social Phobia and Anxiety Inventory for Children* (Beidel et al., 1995). We selected 22 statements that had factor loadings greater than 0.40 in Moon and Oh’s study (2002) with Korean children. The scale includes items concerning avoidance of or distress in various social situations (e.g., “I’m scared to speak in front of the class”). Participants rated each statement on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*all the time*). The internal reliability of the scale was high (United States  $\alpha = .924$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .933$ ).

## Self-worth

Participants completed the five-item global self-worth subscale from Harter’s (2012) *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA). For each item, participants read two statements (e.g., “Some teenagers are often disappointed with themselves BUT other teenagers are pretty pleased with themselves.”) then decided which described them more closely and how true the statement was for them (“Sort of True to me”; “Really True for me”). Korean translations of the Self-Perception Profile (Harter, 1985) have been validated in past studies (Lee et al., 1992; Oh, 2006), but the translated items were unavailable. Therefore, the

measure was translated and back-translated by two independent translators fluent in both Korean and English. The internal reliability of the scale was high (United States  $\alpha = .843$ ; Korea  $\alpha = .859$ ).

## Demographic information

Participants reported their age, grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, and subjective socioeconomic status. Participants’ subjective social socioeconomic status was assessed using the *MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status-Youth Version* (Goodman et al., 2001). The measure consists of a ladder with 10 rungs representing people with different levels of socioeconomic status. Participants chose the rung where they felt their family’s socioeconomic status stands relative to others in their country’s society.

## RESULTS

### Plan of analysis

First, a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) was conducted to assure that the structure of the coping strategies was equivalent for US and Korean adolescents. Then, preliminary analyses were conducted to examine correlations among variables and mean-level country differences. Finally, to address the main hypothesis, multigroup SEM was conducted to examine coping strategies’ relation to internalizing problems across two cultures.

For MGCFA and multigroup structural equation modeling (SEM), we used Mplus v. 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) and employed maximum likelihood estimation to include as many participants with missing endogenous variables. We tested for multigroup invariance of the model for each path and loading using  $\Delta CFI$ ; the more restrictive model was justified when  $\Delta CFI < 0.01$  (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) below 0.08, a standardized root mean square error of approximation (SRMR) below 0.08, and values of comparative fit index (CFI) above 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999) were additional indicators of the goodness-of-fit.

### Structure of coping strategies

A MGCFA was conducted to compare the structure of coping strategies in US and South Korean youth. Items were grouped into four coping strategies based on the four subscales of coping responses in *When Bad Things Happened in School* (WBTH; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004) questionnaire. Preliminary analyses indicated that conflict resolution items were not loading as hypothesized. Upon reexamination of the items, we suggest that the items may be better characterized as a composite variable, made up of potential actions individuals take to resolve a conflict instead

of representative of the coherent latent variable of conflict resolution. One item from the original scale (“Give the kid an ‘I’ message”) was excluded as many participants in the United States had difficulty understanding the item during data collection. The final MGCFA model included the following three factors: cognitive distancing, revenge, and social support seeking. Analyses indicated that the model comparing US and Korean youth met criteria for partial scalar invariance ( $\chi^2(144) = 368.679, p = .000, CFI = 0.915; RMSEA = 0.065; SRMR = 0.065$ ). For analyses examining our main hypotheses, conflict resolution was included as a composite variable.

## Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. Independent samples *t*-tests indicated no significant gender differences in coping strategies in Korean youth. However, there were significant gender differences in US youth. US boys ( $M = 0.90, SD = 0.53$ ) endorsed revenge more than US girls ( $M = 0.58, SD = 0.52; t(269) = 5.04, p < .001$ ). US girls endorsed social support seeking ( $M = 0.98, SD = 0.58; t(270) = -2.54, p < .05$ ) and conflict resolution ( $M = 1.04, SD = 0.38; t(271) = -3.07, p < .01$ ) more than US boys ( $M = 0.78, SD = 0.67; M = 0.90, SD = 0.37$  respectively).

## Coping strategy endorsement by country

To test our first hypothesis about differences in US and Korean youth's endorsement of coping strategies (H1), independent samples *t*-tests comparing victimization, coping strategies, and adjustment outcomes were conducted. US adolescents reported greater victimization, anxiety, depression, and self-worth than Korean adolescents. US adolescents also endorsed all the coping strategies more than Korean youth, with the exception of social support seeking. Korean adolescents endorsed social support seeking more than US adolescents (see Table 1).

## Interpretations predicting adjustment outcomes

To address our prediction that social support seeking and conflict resolution would predict less adjustment problems for both Korean and US youth (H2), but that the associations of adjustment with social support seeking and conflict resolution would vary in strength across cultures (H3a, H3b), we conducted a multigroup SEM model to examine coping strategies' relation to adjustment outcomes across countries. Because preliminary analyses found gender differences in coping strategies, gender was included as a control. Overt and relational victimization were included because prior research has indicated each form of victimization is differentially related to different coping strategies (McWood

et al., 2023), as well as for their significant correlations with adjustment outcomes and coping strategies.

The initial model with all coping strategies predicting adjustment outcomes demonstrated a good model fit. Next, to enhance model parsimony, we removed nonsignificant paths for both countries. Then, paths were compared one by one across countries and were constrained if  $\Delta CFI < 0.01$ . Constrained paths included those from relational victimization to depression, social anxiety, cognitive distancing, revenge, and social support seeking, a path from overt victimization to social anxiety, and a path from conflict resolution to global self-worth. The final model demonstrated a good model fit,  $\chi^2(40) = 83.152, p < .001, CFI = 0.964, RMSEA = 0.054, SRMR = 0.049$ .

As seen in Figure 1, in both countries, relational victimization was positively related to depression, social anxiety, revenge, and cognitive distancing and negatively related to social support seeking. Overt victimization was positively related to social anxiety in both countries. Social support seeking was positively related to global self-worth in both countries, but it was only for Korean adolescents that social support seeking was negatively related to depression and social anxiety. Conflict resolution's positive association with global self-worth was marginally significant for both US and Korean adolescents.

## Gender differences

Separate multigroup SEM analyses were conducted to compare the models between boys and girls in the United States and Korea (H4). In the US sample, the initial model with all coping strategies predicting adjustment outcomes fit well. For model parsimony, nonsignificant paths for both genders were removed. This process removed social support seeking from the model. Then, we constrained each remaining path across genders if constraints did not exceed a  $\Delta CFI$  above 0.01. We constrained paths from relational victimization to depression, global self-worth, and revenge. The final model depicted in Figure 2 demonstrated a good model fit,  $\chi^2(43) = 59.348, p < .05, CFI = 0.970, RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.087$ . There were notable gender differences. Relational victimization was positively related to social anxiety only for girls, whereas overt victimization was positively related to social anxiety only for boys. Revenge was positively related to social anxiety in boys while this path was not significant for girls. Cognitive distancing and conflict resolution were negatively related to social anxiety only for girls. Additionally, conflict resolution was positively related to global self-worth only for girls, but not for boys.

In the Korean sample, the initial model with all coping strategies predicting adjustment outcomes demonstrated excellent model fit. For model parsimony, nonsignificant paths for both genders were removed. Then, we constrained each remaining path across genders if constraints did not exceed a  $\Delta CFI$  above 0.01. We were able to constrain all paths in

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics, correlations between variables, and independent samples *t*-test for US and Korean adolescents.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Overt victimization	—	<b>.646***</b>	<b>-.338***</b>	.268***	<b>.428***</b>	.013	.181**	<b>-.201**</b>	-.069
2. Relational victimization	<b>.450***</b>	—	<b>-.490***</b>	.368***	<b>.574***</b>	<b>.041</b>	.132*	-.161**	-.071
3. Global self-worth	<b>-.058</b>	<b>-.220***</b>	—	<b>-.488***</b>	<b>-.668***</b>	-.104	<b>-.152*</b>	<b>.246***</b>	<b>.229***</b>
4. Social anxiety	.281***	.366***	<b>-.430***</b>	—	<b>.502***</b>	<b>-.039</b>	.066	.001	-.028
5. Depression	<b>.140**</b>	<b>.383***</b>	<b>-.603***</b>	<b>.399***</b>	—	.069	.122*	-.131*	-.066
6. Cognitive distancing	.132**	<b>.173***</b>	-.066	.137**	.139**	—	<b>-.047</b>	<b>-.198**</b>	<b>-.105</b>
7. Revenge	.108*	.163***	-.062	.115*	.091	.052	—	-.144*	-.185**
8. Social support seeking	<b>-.045</b>	<b>-.152**</b>	.201***	<b>-.178***</b>	<b>-.234***</b>	<b>-.149**</b>	<b>-.051</b>	—	<b>.608***</b>
9. Conflict resolution	-.050	-.089	.148**	<b>-.131**</b>	<b>-.132**</b>	<b>.033</b>	<b>-.089</b>	<b>.479***</b>	—
Korea ( <i>n</i> = 463)									
Mean (SD)	1.26 (0.44)	1.36 (0.52)	2.78 (0.72)	1.92 (0.64)	0.76 (0.61)	0.59 (0.49)	0.48 (0.46)	1.07 (0.59)	1.00 (0.42)
United States ( <i>n</i> = 292)									
Mean (SD)	1.52 (0.59)	2.01 (0.85)	2.99 (0.70)	2.10 (0.69)	0.87 (0.59)	0.74 (0.55)	0.70 (0.55)	0.90 (0.63)	1.11 (0.43)
<i>t</i>	-6.74	-13.07	-3.86	-3.41	-2.27	-4.08	-5.83	3.69	-3.18
<i>p</i>	.000	.000	.000	.001	.024	.000	.000	.000	.002

Note: Correlations between variables for Korean adolescents are presented below the diagonal, and correlations among the variables for US adolescents are presented above the diagonal. Bolded correlations indicated cultural differences in the magnitude of the correlations.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001.



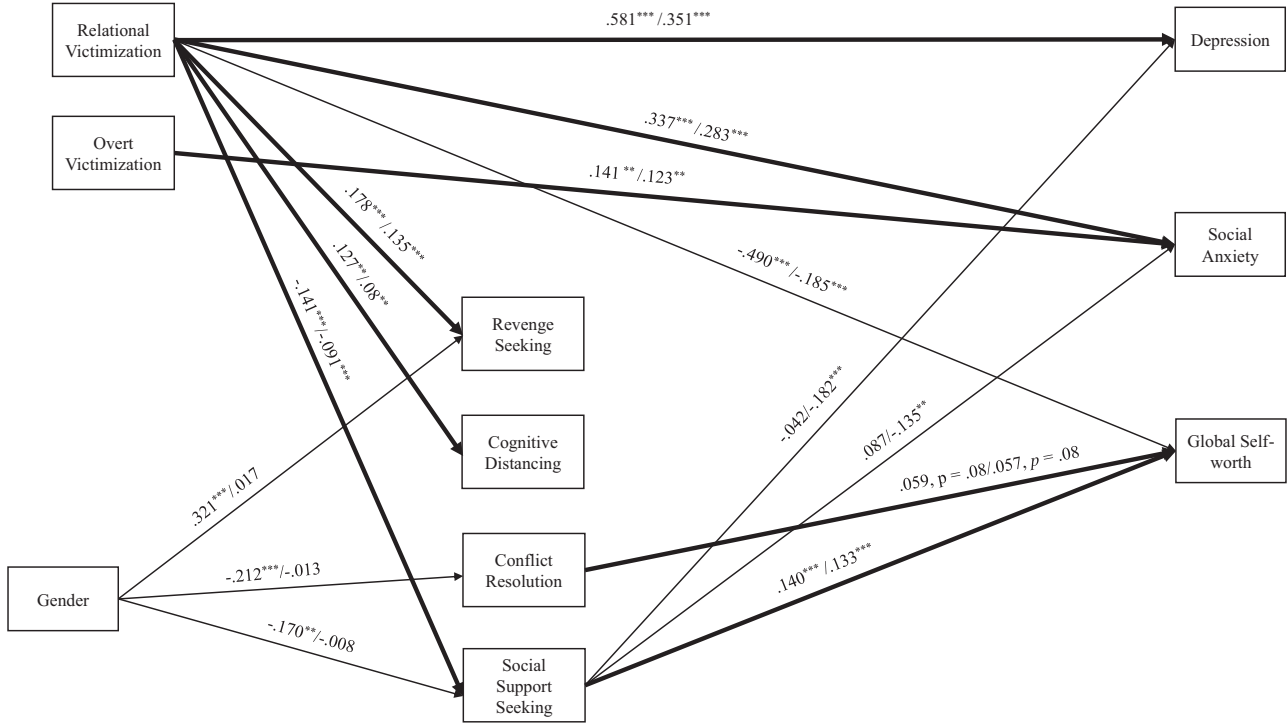


FIGURE 1 Path analysis of the coping strategies' relation to internalizing problems. Standardized coefficients are reported for the US sample first and for the Korean sample second. Bolded paths indicate that they were constrained. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

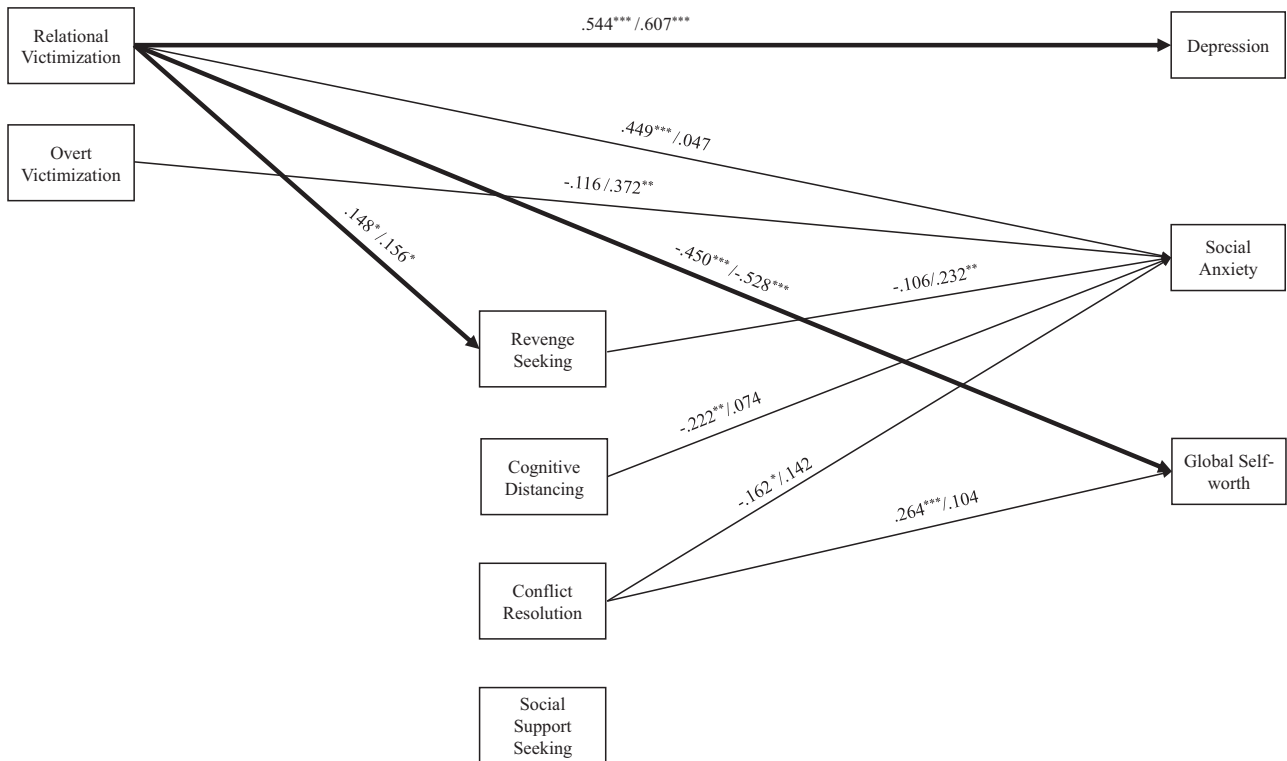
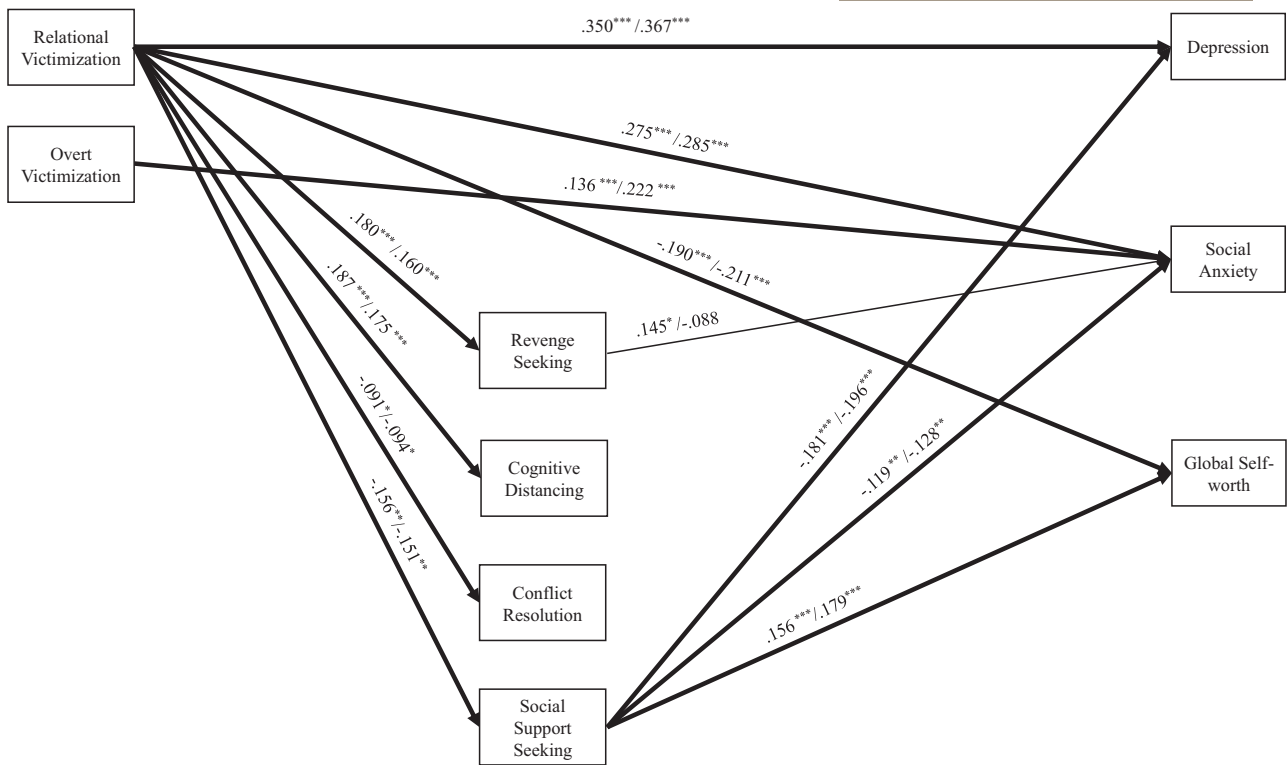


FIGURE 2 Path analysis of the coping strategies' relation to internalizing problems in the US sample. Standardized coefficients are reported for the US girls first and for boys second. Bolded paths indicate that they were constrained. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

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**FIGURE 3** Path analysis of the coping strategies' relation to internalizing problems in the Korean sample. Standardized coefficients are reported for the Korean girls first and for boys second. Bolded paths indicate that they were constrained. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

the model except for a path from revenge to social anxiety. The final model depicted in Figure 3 demonstrated an excellent model fit,  $\chi^2(33) = 36.838, p = .296, CFI = 0.994, RMSEA = 0.023, SRMR = 0.040$ . Social support seeking was the only coping strategy that was significantly related to depression, social anxiety, and global self-worth for both Korean boys and girls. Only for Korean girls was revenge positively related to social anxiety.

**Exploratory post-hoc analysis**

The main purpose of the current study was to examine whether coping strategies in response to peer victimization were differentially associated with adjustment outcomes between Korean and US youth. The current study was not designed to draw any conclusion regarding how variables were causally related. However, considering the evidence for a bi-directional relationship between adjustment problems and victimization (Christina et al., 2021), and that the current study uses cross-sectional data for analyses, we ran separate post-hoc analyses to explore the reverse direction of associations from adjustment outcomes to coping strategies to relational and overt victimization in our sample. The results of the post-hoc analyses can be found in the Supplementary Analyses online. This model also had excellent model fit,  $\chi^2(21) = 51.626, p < .001, CFI = 0.960, RMSEA = 0.064, SRMR = 0.038$ , thus indicating likely reciprocal relations among these variables.

**DISCUSSION**

The current study examined adolescents' endorsement of various coping strategies in response to peer victimization and if these coping strategies were similar or different in their relations to adjustment outcomes for adolescents from the United States and Korea. Overall, our results indicate that there are some variations in the mean level endorsement of different coping strategies between US and Korean adolescents, as well as how coping strategies are associated with depression, social anxiety, and global self-worth. We also found some gender differences in these relationships within each country.

**Cross-cultural variability in coping strategies**

As predicted, US adolescents endorsed conflict resolution more than Korean adolescents, while Korean adolescents endorsed social support seeking more than US adolescents. Thus, it seems youth utilize coping strategies more that align with the norms of the society they are embedded in. Similar to Taiwanese youth that sought out social connection with their close friends through venting (Ma & Bellmore, 2016a, 2016b), Korean youth also report seeking social support to cope with peer victimization. In Asian cultures, individuals are socialized to emphasize one's close relationships in making sense of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It may be that for both Taiwanese and Korean youth, seeking

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social connections and support is preferred and prioritized to reestablish social connections, essential aspects of their self-construal.

As the fit between cultural norms and coping strategies is important for adjustment (Ma et al., 2018), we also predicted that social support seeking would be associated with fewer adjustment problems in Korean than US youth, whereas conflict resolution would be associated with fewer adjustment problems in US than Korean youth. Multigroup SEM results partially supported these hypotheses, indicating some variation in coping strategies' relations to adjustment outcomes across two groups. Social support seeking was positively related to global self-worth in both Korean and US youth and negatively related to depression and social anxiety only for Korean youth. For both groups, conflict resolution had a marginally significant positive relation to global self-worth. This result aligns with Lam and Zane's finding (2004) that both White and Asian Americans preferred primary control coping goals, which aim to alter the existing environment to meet the individual's need, over secondary coping goals, which focus on adjusting the individual to fit the environment (McCarty et al., 1999). Although primary control coping strategies like conflict resolution better align with independent self-construal, it may be that the individual's need for primary control to achieve goals is universal (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995).

The findings also align with Ma and Bellmore's (2016a) qualitative report of US youth's responses to victimization. US youth in their study were less willing to show their negative emotions. Rather than venting to close friends, US youth were more focused on calming down and retaining their self-integrity. This may explain why social support seeking was unrelated to depression and social anxiety in US youth. Although social support seeking has been associated with better adjustment in the past (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004), for US youth in our study, it may have meant loss of self-efficacy and reliance and therefore was unrelated to depression and social anxiety. This is not to say that social support seeking is not beneficial for US adolescents at all, as social support seeking was negatively correlated with depression and social anxiety and positively correlated with global self-worth. However, when multiple coping strategies were considered simultaneously, we did not find any unique relationships between social support seeking and depression and social anxiety, suggesting the importance of attending to a variety of coping strategies simultaneously in order to further our understanding of coping strategy effectiveness.

An interesting thing to note is that the significant positive relationship between social support seeking and global self-worth in the US sample disappeared in multigroup SEM examining gender differences in the sample. It may be that there is a subgroup of US youth whose social support seeking was promoting their global self-worth that was driving the significant association between social support seeking and global self-worth. However, separating US boys and girls may have removed power from the analysis, making social

support seeking's association with global self-worth disappear. Future investigations may further explore subgroups of youth that vary in terms of coping strategies' relation to adjustment.

The collectivistic nature of peer victimization in Korea, or *wang-ta*, may explain why social support seeking had a more robust association with adjustment outcomes in Korean youth than US youth. There are usually one or only a few targets of *wang-ta* that are ostracized by a majority of their classmates, with whom they have to share the same classroom and take classes together for the entire school year. Thus, it may be imperative for victims to regain social connections in order to cope with such extreme social isolation, and why social support seeking may be an especially effective coping strategy for victims in Korea. Our finding has important implications for interventions in Korea. Korean youth in our sample had lower reports of victimization in general compared to our US sample. However, it may mean that the few that did report on experiencing peer victimization in our Korean sample are targets of *wang-ta* and undergoing a more extreme degree of harassment and adjustment problems. Indeed, according to the "healthy context paradox" (Salmivalli, 2018), experiencing peer victimization in a context with overall low levels of victimization may exacerbate victims' psychological adjustment. As demonstrated in past findings documenting the healthy context paradox (e.g., Salmivalli, 2018; Yun & Juvonen, 2020), victimized Korean youth may be at higher risk of adjustment problems and interventions should incorporate elements that would assist victims' support seeking.

It also may be that social support seeking is more effective in buffering the consequences of victimization in Asia due to a higher likelihood of receiving the social support that youth seek. How responsive adults and friends are when victims seek social support is an important factor in adolescent victims' mental health (Jones et al., 2015). Compared to US peer witnesses of bullying, Taiwanese peer witnesses were more likely to offer help to the victims by providing comfort, whereas US youth were more likely to directly tell the bully to stop (Ma & Bellmore, 2016b). Considering that Korea and Taiwan share similar cultural values for interpersonal harmony (Zhang et al., 2005), Korean peer witnesses may also be more likely to help victims by sharing social connections and be more responsive and able to provide the victims' need for social support. In such an environment where victims' need for social connections can be met, social support seeking is likely to benefit adjustment outcomes. In comparison, US youth may not be as successful in receiving social support seeking compared to Korean youth. US youth interact with different peers in each class, and their relationships with teachers, including their homeroom teachers, tend to become more impersonal (Duchesne et al., 2012). In such a context, US youth's social support seeking efforts may fail, making social support seeking a less effective strategy for them.

Although no hypotheses were made regarding victimization's associations with coping strategies in each country, an interesting finding to note is that the associations between

relational victimization and coping strategies were more pervasive compared to the link between overt victimization and coping strategies. This may be due to developmental changes in the form of peer victimization youth engage in as youth leave childhood and enter adolescence. As adolescents' cognitive abilities become more sophisticated and social status gains prominence, their use of relational aggression increases as well, which may make relational victimization more relevant for adolescents' adjustment compared to overt victimization. Indeed, relational victimization was reported at a significantly higher rate than overt victimization in both of our Korean and US samples. Moreover, meta-analysis findings have indicated the magnitude of the link between internalizing problems and overt victimization decreased with age, while it increased with age for relational victimization (Casper & Card, 2017).

## Gender differences

There were gender differences in the relationships between coping strategies and adjustment outcomes in both countries. For US boys only, revenge was positively related to social anxiety. Men in Western societies are more likely to form an independent self-construal, emphasizing separateness from others (Cross et al., 2011). In addition, compared to girls, boys typically display more revenge motivations (McDonald & Asher, 2018). Although adolescent males believed that hitting back was an effective strategy to respond to peer victimization (Nixon et al., 2020), revenge-seeking behaviors could be a risk behavior for increased victimization and psychological maladjustment (Erath et al., 2019; McDonald & Lochman, 2012). This may explain revenge seeking's significant positive association with relational victimization and social anxiety in US boys.

For US girls only, cognitive distancing was negatively related to social anxiety, and conflict resolution was negatively related to social anxiety and positively related to global self-worth. Previous work has shown that due to their association with poor peer experiences and psychological adjustment, avoidant coping strategies are ineffective in dealing with peer victimization (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011). However, mixed results are common. For instance, cognitive distancing predicted increases in peer victimization only in boys in one study (Shelley & Craig, 2010) but only for girls with high initial levels of peer victimization in another (Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010).

Engaged coping strategies, such as conflict resolution, are generally linked with positive peer experiences and better psychological adjustment (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011), which is consistent with our findings for US girls. It seems that proactively responding to peer victimization buffers US girls from social anxiety and boosts their global self-worth. However, there were no significant findings for US boys regarding conflict resolution in our path model. Considering past studies have found null or mixed results or only a modest pattern of results, moderating factors, such as the severity

of peer victimization, may need to be examined to understand gender differences (Erath et al., 2019; Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Visconti & Troop-Gordon, 2010). For instance, there is some evidence that approach coping, which includes conflict resolution and social support seeking, may protect nonvictimized boys from loneliness and peer rejection but put victimized boys at greater risk for both (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). Future investigation should consider variation in the severity of peer victimization experiences as a potential moderator to better understand the buffering effects of coping strategies.

In Korea, the multigroup path analysis indicated that revenge was positively related to social anxiety for girls only. It may be that the importance of maintaining the relational self-view is even greater for East Asian females, and therefore endorsing revenge, which could disrupt relationships, may lead to social anxiety. According to the social role perspective (Eagly et al., 2000), in many cultures, girls are socialized to be nurturing and relationship-oriented, whereas more agentic qualities are encouraged for boys. In a culture where revenge might be even less accepted, violating the norm might be anxiety provoking, especially for girls based on their even stricter gender roles. However, and as noted above, there was a significant positive link between revenge and social anxiety only for US boys. Thus, variation across countries and within country by gender suggests that the relationship between revenge and social anxiety is inconsistent and deserves further investigation.

## Limitations and future research

Despite the notable findings and contributions of the current study, there are some limitations that should be noted. First, our US sample was recruited from religiously affiliated private schools in the South and was mostly White. It may be that in regions that are dominated by the culture of honor, like the southern states of the United States (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994), coping through revenge seeking, which ascribes to the honor norms, may not be as maladaptive as compared to other regions that are not honor-norm centric. Our Korean sample was recruited from three urban and suburban cities in South Korea. How coping strategies work for adolescents attending smaller schools in rural areas of Korea may also be different. Social support seeking may be even more relevant due to a smaller peer group at school, or the overall strength of the relationships may be weaker because teachers may better monitor and regulate peer aggression happening in smaller classrooms. Therefore, we urge caution in generalization and emphasize the importance of considering the role of norms in these processes, as past studies have demonstrated variation in the influence of coping strategies by race and socioeconomic status (i.e., low-income African American youth; Hong et al., 2020) and whether victimization is race-based or not (Mendez et al., 2016). However, we also note that our results were consistent with past findings comparing American and Taiwanese youth's coping strategies (Ma &

Bellmore, 2016a) and add support for cultural variation in how dominant coping strategies in each society are related to adjustment.

Second, the current study also did not collect any data assessing endorsement of cultural norms or self-construal. It is possible that our country-level differences would be better explained by individual-level variation in norm endorsement. We suggest future studies measure cultural norm endorsement directly to better understand and explain the mechanisms behind country differences.

Third, the social support seeking strategy was measured broadly in the current study. It is likely that there is variation in the level of effectiveness in coping depending on the source of the social support. For instance, in their longitudinal study, Visconti and Troop-Gordon (2010) distinguished sources of support and found that support seeking from parents and teachers predicted increased loneliness, whereas support seeking from teachers and friends increased anxiety. In addition, there are other forms of coping, such as cognitive restructuring, physical avoidance, and rumination (Connor-Smith et al., 2000), that were not examined in the current study. The field can benefit with more cross-cultural examinations of coping strategies that expand beyond the four strategies and involve more fine-grained analyses.

Additionally, all data were collected through self-reports; however, multi-informant studies suggest that the associations of coping strategies and victimization may vary depending on the informant. For instance, social support seeking predicted higher teacher-reported peer victimization but was unrelated to self-reported peer victimization in adolescents (Erath et al., 2019). Erath et al. speculated that this may reflect teachers interpreting support seeking as less independent problem-solving, teachers mismanaging information regarding peer victimization which exacerbates the problems, or teachers having heightened awareness of peer problems. Their results suggest that teachers, who have potentially important roles in assisting victims, may perceive the same coping strategy differently from victims. Including multi-informants, especially peer raters, in future studies will provide more nuanced understanding of coping strategies relations to adjustment, which may, in turn, inform the development of more effective intervention programs.

Finally, our cross-sectional examination is limited in explaining the longitudinal or causal relations between coping strategies and adjustment. Our examination of the association among adjustment, coping strategies, and peer victimization in both directions indicated that both models demonstrated a good fit to the data. Although we cannot imply the causal pathways among the variables with our cross-sectional data, our findings along with past research indicating bidirectional effects between adjustment and peer victimization (Christina et al., 2021) suggest the need for experimental studies that address youth's adjustment outcomes and subsequent changes in their coping responses. Furthermore, future research should collect longitudinal data to examine cultural variation in how victimization, coping strategies, and internalizing problems are interrelated over time.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the results demonstrate the significance of coping with victimization in a way that meets cultural norms. Although both social support seeking and conflict resolution are considered adaptive coping strategies (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004), our findings suggest that social support seeking is more beneficial for Korean youth. There is cultural variation in how coping strategies for peer victimization are related to youth adjustment. An understanding of cultural variation in these processes is important and relevant for developing culturally appropriate interventions that effectively assist victimized youth by buffering negative mental health consequences of peer victimization.

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