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Cyber-bystanding in context: A review of the literature on witnesses' responses to cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

As a form of peer victimisation, cyberbullying can be conceptualised as a group phenomenon; research on cyberbullying should therefore consider all participant roles, rather than focusing solely on perpetrators and victims. Bystanders are of particular interest in both traditional and cyberbullying as they have the potential to amend the situation by intervening, yet most witnesses remain passive. This paper reviews the literature on cyberbullying bystander behaviour, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative studies to identify factors that influence witnesses' responses. It further compares the ability of two theoretical frameworks (the bystander effect and social cognitive theory) to account for and integrate the diverse findings of these studies. Although the bystander effect is the dominant paradigm for explaining bystander inaction in many contexts, social cognitive theory may be better able to capture the complex and contextually dependent nature of cyberbullying situations. This paper concludes by discussing the implications of this approach for future research, and for potential interventions to improve witnesses' responses.

1. Introduction to cyberbullying

The increasing sophistication and availability of technological devices have enabled the extensive integration of communication technologies into the fabric of daily life (Deuze, 2010). While the constant connectedness is in many ways advantageous, particularly with regards to sustaining interpersonal contact, there are some drawbacks. One downside is cyberbullying, which is known to affect mental health and impair academic performance (see Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013, for a review), and in extreme cases has been linked with self-harm and suicidal ideation (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). The extent and potential severity of negative impacts, both on those directly involved and their wider social networks, necessitates a thorough investigation of the phenomenon, moderating factors, and interventions that may reduce the frequency and effects of cyberbullying. This literature review will examine the role of bystanders, who have been largely ignored in previous cyberbullying research. It will further evaluate and compare the bystander effect and social cognitive theory, which are the dominant paradigms used to explain witnesses' responses and peer aggression respectively.

1.1. Definition, prevalence and impact of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is broadly defined as a repeated, intentional act of aggression carried out through an electronic medium against a victim who is less able to defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008). The affordances of technology allow cyberbullying to take many forms (e.g. insults, threats, embarrassing photos) and to be perpetrated through a variety of media (e.g. texting, email, social networking sites). Though Smith et al. (2008) definition is the most widely accepted, scholars remain in disagreement over several aspects of it: in particular, whether acts need to be repeated in order to qualify as cyberbullying as they do for traditional bullying (Nocentini et al., 2010; DeSmet et al., 2014), and whether the impact on the victim should be taken into consideration (Menesini et al., 2012; Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). Estimates of prevalence consequently vary according to the strictness of definitional criteria and the time period assessed. However, most studies tend to report victimisation rates of around 20–40% (Tokunaga, 2010), although rates have ranged as widely as 4–57% (Dehue, 2013).

These high prevalence rates are particularly concerning due to the extensive and enduring effects of cyberbullying on those who are victimised (see Cassidy et al., 2013, for a review). Furthermore, the consequences of cyberbullying extend beyond the immediate victims: those who witness online aggression may come to believe it is normative and acceptable (Kowalski, 2008; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014); schools that do not adequately address cyberbullying are perceived as less safe, and even cyberbullies themselves appear to

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be negatively affected (Cassidy et al., 2013). As cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, researchers have drawn on the extensive literature of traditional bullying research in their attempt to understand cyberbullying. Consequently, researchers have examined the similarities and differences between the two types of bullying to ascertain whether our understanding and models of traditional bullying can be applied to online interactions.

1.2. Relation to traditional bullying

Many researchers have conceptualised cyberbullying as the extension of traditional bullying to electronic media (e.g. Williams & Guerra, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008), and indeed the two forms of victimisation show many similarities. Both involve the intentional harm of a victim who is less able to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al., 2008); additionally, sources and targets typically know each other in real life (Cassidy et al., 2013). However, cyberbullying is arguably distinct from traditional bullying in several ways. In particular, it is possible for bullies to remain anonymous (Cassidy et al., 2013); it is more pervasive as it does not require those involved to be physically co-present (Bastiaensens et al., 2015), meaning victims can potentially be affected at any time or place; and it is more difficult for adults to detect and police, as privacy and account settings often exclude them from the online arena where cyberbullying occurs (Dooley, Pyzalksi, & Cross, 2009; Cassidy et al., 2013). Despite their differences, both cyber- and traditional bullying are forms of peer aggression that often occur within established social contexts. Therefore, in order to effectively address the problem of cyberbullying, researchers must consider the broader school community and explore the different roles individuals can take in cyberbullying incidents. They should further explore the factors motivating choice of roles and actions, and methods by which these factors might be manipulated to encourage pro-social online behaviour.

Although it is frequently oversimplified as a bully-victim dyadic interaction, peer victimisation can be better conceptualised as a group phenomenon involving multiple individuals interacting in a range of roles. These roles tend to be broadly categorised as bullies, victims, and bystanders; however, Olweus (1993) argues for the existence of eight roles, at least in traditional bullying: bullies, followers, passive supporters, supporters, onlookers, possible defenders, actual defenders, and victims. These roles may be further complicated in cyberbullying, as individuals may become bystanders in various ways. In traditional bullying, bystanders are immediately physically present; cyberbullying bystanders may witness the cyberbullying online as it occurs, or after the incident ends. Alternatively, they may be with the perpetrator or victim when the message is sent or received, or they may have the message forwarded to them by others (Li, Smith, & Cross, 2012). DeSmet et al. (2014) further note that the roles involved in cyberbullying, particularly those of bystanders, are far more fluid and contextually dependent than in traditional bullying. For example, 8% of the Belgian students surveyed by Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, and Pabian (2014) had performed multiple roles within the same incident of cyberbullying.

The roles of bully and victim have both been extensively explored in the cyberbullying literature: bullies as the immediate origin of the antisocial behaviour; and victims as those suffering the greatest impact as a consequence (Cassidy et al., 2013). However, limiting research to these participant roles obscures the potential influence of bystanders and the wider school community who are likely to have a significant role in shaping the occurrence and course of cyberbullying incidents (as in traditional bullying; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012; Vreeman & Carroll, 2007). Research on cyberbullying and interventions would benefit from turning to the role of bystanders, who are known to be critical in bullying interventions, yet who have been largely overlooked in cyberbullying research.

1.3. Bystanders of cyberbullying: prevalence and roles

Bystanders may prove to be even more critical to the course of cyberbullying than in traditional bullying, due to their sheer number and presence. Whereas cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation rates tend to be around 5–20% (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Van Cleemput et al., 2014) and 20–40% (Tokunaga, 2010) respectively, Lenhart et al. (2011) found that 88% of US teens had witnessed incidents of cyberbullying on social media alone. These individuals are considered to be crucial in addressing (or conversely, encouraging) cyberbullying, as their actions may alter the course and effects of incidents in a number of ways. For example, bystanders may intervene in support of victims, either directly (by confronting the bully or comforting the victim) or indirectly (by reporting the incident to adults; DeSmet et al., 2012). In doing so, they may threaten the bully's status and make them stop, as well as ameliorating the negative effects on victims (Bastiaensens et al., 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Individuals who publicly intervene also increase the likelihood that other bystanders will do likewise, by modelling dissenting behaviour (Anderson, Bresnahan, & Musatics, 2014). Conversely, bystanders may encourage the cyberbully or join in with the victimisation, which may make the bully more aggressive and exacerbate the negative impact on the victim (Bastiaensens et al., 2014).

Despite their potential influence, most bystanders remain passive when they witness cyberbullying: Lenhart et al. (2011) survey of US teenagers found that 91% of those who had witnessed cyberbullying on social media had ignored it at some point. Similarly, Van Cleemput et al. (2014) survey of Belgian students found that 58.6% had remained passive, while Huang and Chou's (2010) survey of Taiwanese high school students also found inaction to be the predominant response. These rates have been replicated experimentally, with 50–90% of participants failing to intervene at some stage in response to various cyberbullying paradigms (Dillon & Bushman, 2015; Freis & Gurung, 2013; Shultz, Heilman, & Hart, 2014). This inaction is of particular concern as bystanders may not necessarily condone the bullying, but bullies may perceive their lack of intervention as tacit approval of their actions (Bastiaensens et al., 2014).

2. The bystander effect

The failure of bystanders to take action is perhaps not entirely unexpected. Indeed, the phenomenon of bystander inaction has been recognised and explored since 1968, when Darley and Latané published their seminal paper on the bystander effect: the phenomenon whereby individuals are less likely to offer help if other passive bystanders are present. These authors proposed that if bystanders are to intervene, they must first: (1) notice the situation; (2) recognise the need for assistance; (3) feel personally responsible; (4) believe they are able to help; and (5) consciously decide to intervene (Latané & Darley, 1970). However, three key processes often interfere with this progression, deterring bystanders from intervening. The presence of others may decrease the personal feeling of responsibility experienced by each individual present (*diffusion of responsibility*); it may make individuals self-conscious, as other bystanders may judge their actions (*evaluation apprehension*); or individuals may witness the inaction of others and conclude that no action is required (*pluralistic ignorance*; Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970). The bystander effect has been consistently and robustly replicated in a variety of contexts (see Fischer et al., 2011, for a review). However, a relatively small number of studies have examined whether the bystander effect can be replicated online, especially in the context of cyberbullying.

2.1. The online bystander effect

The few studies that have empirically tested the bystander effect online have been largely confined to the attempted replication of the