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Who's to blame?: The effects of victim disclosure on bystander reactions to cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Recent evidence suggests that bystanders are even less likely to intervene with online compared to offline bullying. Given that receiving social support following bullying can buffer victims from maladjustment, it is important to consider specific factors influencing bystanders' intention to intervene and help the victim in online contexts. The current experiment examined how cybervictims' disclosures (i.e., sharing personal information) on Facebook influence bystanders' attributions of blame, empathy, and intention to intervene on behalf of a victim following a cyberbullying incident. Participants ($N = 118$) were randomly assigned to view the Facebook profile of a cybervictim who posted an update ranging in personal disclosure (high vs. low) and valence (positive vs. negative). Results indicate that viewing the high disclosure profile (i.e., more personal post from victim), regardless of valence, caused participants to blame the victim more and feel less empathy for the victim, which in turn predicted lower likelihood of bystander intervention with the bullying incident. These results are discussed in terms of implications for encouraging positive bystander behavior in response to incidents of cyberbullying.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, Facebook has become the second most visited website in the United States, only behind Google. Despite reports of its recent declining popularity among younger generations (Piper Jaffray, 2014), Facebook remains the most widely used social media platform among young adults (Guimaraes, 2014; Harvard Institute of Politics, 2011). Although social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook offer opportunities for communication and connection with others, they also provide a new venue for negative social interactions. Cyberbullying, the use of online media to engage in intentional aggression characterized by a power imbalance, has become a growing problem among users (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Although much research focuses on the cyberbullying experiences of children and adolescents, similar negative online experiences are also prevalent among young adults. In a study of undergraduate students, Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Reese (2012) found that almost one third of the sample were cyberbullied in the past six months and that over 30% experienced their first cyberbullying incident during their college years. Taken together with evidence of high rates of social media usage among college-aged youth (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), these findings suggest that further investigation of cyberbullying experiences on SNS among young adults is warranted.

Much like victims of traditional bullying, cybervictims suffer a range of negative psychological outcomes (e.g., depression; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). Bullying that occurs online, as opposed to in person, may be particularly harmful for victims, insofar as incidents typically occur in front of a wider audience. In turn, the reactions of online bystanders play an important role in shaping victim adjustment following cyberbullying incidents. Whereas victims experience heightened distress when bystanders do not intervene with bullying situations (Salmivalli, 2010), receiving support from onlookers can significantly alleviate victims' plight (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). As such, it is critical to understand the conditions under which bystanders will show increased support for victims of cyberbullying.

2. Online bystanders: an attributional framework

Bystander intervention in bullying incidents both online (Huang & Chou, 2010) and offline (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001) is

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uncommon. Although the presence of many onlookers and options for more discreet intervention (e.g., sending victim private message of support) in online contexts suggest more opportunities for bystander intervention, research indicates that bystanders are significantly *less* likely to intervene with bullying incidents that occur online compared to in person (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013). Given that the likelihood of intervention decreases as number of bystanders increases (Fischer et al., 2011), the large size of online audiences may account for lower rates of intervention. Of particular concern, bystanders are not only unlikely to intervene on behalf of the victim online, but they are also significantly more likely to reinforce the cyberbully in online as compared to offline settings (Barlińska et al., 2013).

When might bystanders be more likely to intervene on behalf of victims of cyberbullying? That is, in an environment where a victim's 'audience' multiplies from 20 classmates to over 200 Facebook friends, what factors predict bystander support for victims? Although bystander behavior in traditional school contexts has been considered, less is known about the specific factors influencing bystander behavior online. Considering cyberbullying within an attributional framework can elucidate the specific cognitive and affective processes guiding online bystanders' intentions to intervene. Weiner's attribution theory posits that following a negative event, observers are likely to try to understand why it happened. Their causal inference (i.e., attribution), in turn, affects their emotional reaction. This cognitive–affective reaction then guides subsequent behavior (Weiner, 1995, 2006). For example, when determining whether to provide assistance to a person in need, individuals show the lowest rates of help-giving when they make internal and controllable attributions to the actor (e.g., he brought this on himself), whereas making uncontrollable attributions and feeling sympathy for the actor increases help-giving behavior (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004).

In offline bullying contexts, bystanders who empathize with the victim are more likely to intervene and provide support (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Salmivalli, 2010). Although limited bullying research has examined how bystander attributions about the victim impact bystander behavior (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), studies among victims of rape suggest that onlookers who blame the victim for his/her plight more commonly do nothing to help (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; McMahon, 2010). Similar processes may operate in online bullying contexts, such that higher levels of victim blame will come at the cost of decreased empathy, in turn reducing bystanders' sense of responsibility to support the victim (Runions & Bak, 2015).

Indeed, online bystanders frequently perceive victims as blameworthy. In one study of online bystander behavior, participants read a hypothetical cyberbullying scenario (i.e., embarrassing pictures circulated online) and described why they thought this happened. The majority of participants believed it was the victim's own fault. Specifically, almost one third of bystanders attributed the cyberbullying to internal, controllable victim characteristics (e.g., victim provoked the bully), as opposed to characteristics uncontrollable by the victim (e.g., unattractiveness; Holfeld, 2014). Another study of cyberbullying found that bystanders who viewed victims as responsible for their own plight were significantly less likely to offer social support (Weber, Ziegele, & Schnauber, 2013). Bystanders' emotional reactions to the victim may also factor into their behavioral decisions. Results from one study indicate that bystanders who were more upset by witnessing cyberbullying were also more likely to provide the victim subsequent support (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013). Taken together, these findings suggest that the degree to which bystanders a) blame victims for their plight and b) feel for the victim (i.e., empathize) impacts their intention to intervene and provide support for the victim.

Unique features of the online environment may also influence the aforementioned cognitive–affective processes in ways that differ from traditional offline bullying situations. For example, in school-based incidents bystanders are often small in number and privy to limited information regarding how the bullying incident unfolded. The incident is also temporally confined—after it occurs, bystanders may forget or distort details of the event. Additionally, those who did not directly witness the bullying can only access information about the incident through word of mouth. In contrast, cyberbullying incidents frequently occur on public SNS profiles, accessible to a very large number of peers and for an indefinite period of time (Runions & Bak, 2015). That is, harassing pictures and posts rarely disappear online. The wide audience of bystanders can then use concrete contextual cues, such as information available on a cybervictim's social media profile, to infer why the bullying occurred. For example, bystanders who perceive a victim's online behavior as provocative or socially inappropriate (e.g., sharing overly personal feelings) may display greater victim blame and less victim empathy, in turn reducing their likelihood of intervening (Weber et al., 2013).

3. Determinants of bystander cognitive–affective reactions: victim disclosure

To understand when and why bystanders intervene with cyberbullying, it is important to examine factors influencing bystanders' attributions of blame and empathy for a cybervictim. Yet, little research has considered how specific features of cyberbullying incidents impact bystanders' cognitive–affective processes. Studies of offline victimization, largely regarding sexual assaults or rape, suggest that onlookers who perceive victim behavior as inappropriate or provocative are more likely to blame and feel less empathy for the victim. For example, participants assigned less jail time to a male perpetrator in a hypothetical rape case when the victim was described as dressing in more revealing clothing (Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1980). In one study considering attributions of blame in cyberbullying incidents, Weber et al. (2013) found that victims who disclosed more personal information (e.g., phone number, address) online were blamed more for being bullied, and these victims were in turn less likely to receive social support from bystanders. That is, bystanders' perceptions of victim responsibility were shaped by the content and perceived appropriateness of the victim's social media profile.

Although the literature concerning victim disclosure as it relates to bystander behavior is scarce, initial findings suggest that online disclosure among victims affects bystanders' perceptions of cyberbullying incidents. Thus far, researchers have focused on how the amount of objective personal information disclosed (e.g., phone number, email address; Taddicken, 2014; Weber et al., 2013) impacts bystander perceptions of victims. However, while sharing personal information through these personal profile details has become less common among young adult users on websites like Facebook, many continue to disclose personal experiences through posts or picture uploads on their own profiles (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Van Gool, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2015). On social media, highly personal disclosures and "oversharing" of personal information elicits negative judgments from others, insofar as these posts signal attention-seeking behavior (Forest & Wood, 2012; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014).

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