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Factors influencing bystanders' behavioral reactions in cyberbullying situations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiential, psychological, and situational factors influencing behavioral reactions of bystanders witnessing cyberbullying. It also investigated whether the 'bystander effect' is valid in cyberbullying situations. In addition, a moderation effect of the presence of other bystanders was examined between various influencing factors and bystander's defending tendency. A total of 1058 middle and high school students in metropolitan areas participated in the study, and the experiences of 331 students who have witnessed cyberbullying were analyzed. First, four types of bystanders were found: outsiders were the majority (n = 201, 60.7%), followed by defenders (n = 101, 30.5%), reinforcers (n = 18, 5.4%), and assistants (n = 11, 3.3%). Second, bystanders demonstrated more defending behaviors in the absence of other bystanders, thereby validating the 'bystander effect' in cyberbullying situations. Third, low moral disengagement, low anti-social conformity, high perceived control of the situation and bad relationship with bullies were identified as significant predictors of a bystander's defending tendency. Finally, the presence of other bystanders moderated the effect between moral disengagement and the bystander's defending tendency in relation to bullies. The implications of these results for the effective prevention and intervention of cyberbullying are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Significance of cyberbullying and bystanders

Peer bullying has received attention as one of the most severe problems causing adolescent suicide rate to rise (Kim, Koh, & Leventhal, 2005; Nam, Nam, & Jang, 2014). Despite consistent efforts to solve the problem, the form of bullying has expanded with the addition of cyberbullying (Boulton, Hardcastle, Down, Fowles, & Simmonds, 2014). Whereas most traditional forms of bullying occur face-to-face in off-line situations, cyberbullying can occur anonymously at any time and any place, thereby significantly reducing the ways a student can avoid bullying (Englander, 2013). According to a report by the Foundation for Preventing Youth Violence (FPYV) in 2013, cyberbullying in Korea increased from 4.5% to 14.2% in the span of one year. According to another report on cyberbullying published by the Korea Internet and Security Agency (KISA) in 2014, the percentage of students who claimed to have been bullied in cyberspace, including verbal threats and defamation of character, was 19%. As a majority of adolescents own smart phones, cyberbullying using mobile messengers and social networking services (SNS) has been increasing (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015).

Moreover, cyberbullying has been linked with more negative outcomes than traditional forms of bullying (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Kowalski, Limber, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Most cyberbullying appears in various forms and has the characteristic of causing serious psychological pain to the victims (Kim & Song, 2013). Because texts and images, used for cyberbullying, can be copied and transmitted indefinitely via smart phones and the Internet; it is difficult to stop this process once it begins. Also, cyberbullying often occurs implicitly in an anonymous form (Lee & Oh, 2012). As the victim in cyberspace is the only one who experiences the bullying, the psychological shock is more severe than with traditional forms of bullying (Cho, 2013; Seo & Cho, 2013).

As Kowalski and Limber (2007) mentioned, the impulse for retaliation may be stronger in cyberbullying situations, resulting in the victim becoming the perpetrator. Kowalski and Limber (2007)

reported that the primary reason behind cyberbullying among youths was retaliation, thereby increasing the likelihood of bully-victims. In fact, a study by König, Gollwitzer, and Steffgen (2010) found that 52.1% of victims in traditional bullying were perpetrators in cyberbullying.

Considering that a one standard deviation increase in student-reported prevalence of teasing and bullying (PTB) was associated with a 20.6% increase in the frequency of dropouts (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013), cyberbullying victimization may also have a similar link with dropouts based on previous studies demonstrating similar or more severe negative outcomes than traditional bullying (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2012; Schneider et al., 2012).

In order to prevent bullying, the role of bystanders who witness bullying is regarded as especially critical (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Oh & Hazler, 2009). Considering situations in which various types of bullying (e.g., verbal, relational, physical, and cyber) overlap each other (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Johnson, 2015), it is challenging to develop effective prevention and intervention techniques to adequately address bullying issues. Bystanders witnessing bullying can play four types of roles (e.g., assistant, reinforcer, outsider, and defender) (Salmivalli, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). The assistants support the perpetrators' bullying behavior, while the reinforcers incite the bullying by laughing out loud or shouting. The outsiders do not take any actions, which can be interpreted as a silent acceptance of the situation. Lastly, the defenders try to stop bullying by directly interacting with the perpetrators or taking other actions such as comforting victims or reporting the situation to teachers or parents (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Although previous studies have found that the roles of bystanders in cyberbullying are similar to those of traditional bullying (Jones, Mitchell, & Turner, 2015; Quirk & Campbell, 2015), there is some evidence to suggest that bystanders in cyberbullying may be different from traditional bullying bystanders. For instance, cyberbullies may have an experience similar to the 'cockpit effect.' The cockpit effect refers to the psychological state of air force pilots inside a cockpit, where they feel less guilt and psychological damage as they do not see or experience the pain their targets feel (Kulka et al., 1990). In cyberbullying, due to its characteristics, it is easy to participate in bullying by sending damaging messages to the victims without experiencing their pain (Kowalski, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), thus many cyberbystanders do not acknowledge that they have become a perpetrator (Kraft, 2011).

1.2. Factors influencing on bystanders reactions

1.2.1. Bystander intervention model (BIM)

The Bystander Intervention Model (BIM), espoused by social psychologists, explains the comprehensive decision making process regarding the bystanders reactions into five phases (Latané & Darley, 1970). Each phase includes the following steps: 1) Identification of the event; 2) Recognition of the situation; 3) Feeling of responsibility to provide help; 4) Deciding on the action that is needed in the situation; and 5) Execution of helping action. Bystanders go through these five steps in deciding whether or not to intervene. Each step is a prerequisite to the following one, making it necessary for the bystander to overcome challenges in any given step, in order to provide help for victims.

The five steps of BIM can be categorized into experiential, psychological, and situational factors. Previous studies identified that a bystanders' past experience of perpetration or victimization was associated with their current behaviors (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013; Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). It implies that experiential factors are related with bystander's decision making process. Previous experiences of perpetration or victimization may increase bystander's sensitivity to bullying, therefore they can be more likely to identify bullying situation. Step 2 in BIM explains the impact of situational factor. As bullying occurs in complicated power dynamics among the participants (Salmivalli et al., 1996), bystanders may recognize what they can and cannot control in the situation, their relationship with bullies or victims, and their popularity among the participants. According to the previous studies, bystanders with high popularity (DeSmet et al., 2012), good relationships with victims (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2015), high perceived control (Romero & Kyriacou, 2016) are more likely to defend victims. In addition, Step 3 implies that psychological factors such as responsibility influence bystander's reactions. Following the procedures of the first three steps, bystanders decide whether or not to help. Therefore, the first three steps are crucial for bystanders to choose whether or not to provide help. The focus of the current study is on the first three factors of the BIM: experiential, psychological, and situational factors.

1.2.2. Experiential factors influencing on bystanders reactions

Previous studies in cyberbullying showed that personal experiential factors are related to defending behavior (Barlińska et al., 2013; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Van Cleemput et al. (2014) concluded that bystanders who were the victims of cyber or traditional bullying in the past months were more likely to defend the victim. Barlińska et al. (2013) reported that a bystander's past perpetrating experience predicts negative bystander's behaviors. Bystanders with experience being a perpetrator are more accepting toward bullying and they show more positive attitude toward aggression (Slee & Rigby, 1993).

1.2.3. Psychological factors influencing on bystanders reactions

The cyber bystanders' defending behavior is affected by individual's psychological characteristics including moral disengagement, anti-social conformity, and empathy (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; DeSmet et al., 2014, 2012; Patterson et al., 2015). DeSmet et al. (2012) reported that bystanders show defending behaviors in cyberbullying when moral disengagement is low; the relationship with victim is good; and the bystander boasts high popularity. A bystander with low moral disengagement tends to show more proactive defending behaviors based on high level of moral evaluation and reasoning skills (Patterson et al., 2015; Shultz, Heilman, & Hart, 2014; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Bastiaensens et al. (2016) also reported that peer pressure as a form of anti-social peer conformity was related with bystanders' defending behaviors. If bystanders show an accepting attitude toward peer group cyberbullying, they tend to actively assist and support the perpetrating behavior due to peer pressure. Empathy is also a major component of bystander intervention, because the cyber bystanders, understanding victim's feelings well, are more likely to defend victims when they witness cyberbullying (Batanova, Espelage, & Rao, 2014). However, the effect of empathy on the bystanders' defending behaviors is controversial as several studies reported contradictory findings. For example, Barlińska, Szuster, and Winiewski (2015) reported that cognitive empathy suppressed the tendency for cyber bystanders' motivation to get involved in the bullying. On the other hand, Shultz et al. (2014) concluded that there was no difference in empathy between defenders and outsiders in cyberbullying. Therefore, the current study sought to examine the role of empathy among bystanders in cyberbullying.