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Student bystander behavior and cultural issues in cyberbullying: When actions speak louder than words



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate whether student bystander interventions can influence the relationship between being a bystander of a cyberbullying incident and being the victim or the aggressor. Another aim is to understand the specific behavior presented by students bystanders, namely whether they noticed incidents of cyberbullying and interpreted these events as an emergency and which actions they determined as being appropriate in providing assistance. Following a cross-cultural perspective to reach these aims, a total of 788 Portuguese and Brazilian college students answered to the Cyberbullying Inventory for College Students. Moderation analysis revealed that intervening moderated the relationship between being the bystander of cyberbullying and being the victim and/or aggressor. A three-way interaction showed that this relationship was stronger in Brazilian students, revealing that the bystanders who were inactive were more likely to also become a victim or an aggressor themselves, whereas those who intervened were less likely to become a victim or an aggressor. Implications for future research and interventive action are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Students and schools have been facing new challenges since life no longer occurs only in the physical world, but in the virtual world as well, leading individuals towards ethical issues regarding their own digital footprint. With this regard, cyberbullying is a current global phenomenon that has been defined as individuals' intentional repeated acts of aggression towards others through the use of various means of technology (Belsey, 2006). This has been an emerging construct which is yet to be fully explored, carrying important implications for society, educational settings and its stakeholders (Francisco, Simão, Ferreira, & Martins, 2015). Despite these implications, the literature on Cyberbullying has presented few contributions regarding the bystanders' role within the phenomenon (Macháková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013). The present study is a call from previous research (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013) to investigate how bystanders can have an impact

on how incidents of cyberbullying unfold and thus influence the lives of many individuals. With an important basis on Latane and Darley (1970) bystander model of the bystander effect, the current study extends previous findings (e.g. Dillon & Bushman, 2015) by presenting a new approach on the relationship between being a bystander and experiencing victimization and aggression. Moreover, as far as we know, this is one of the few studies that integrates a multicultural approach to how bystanders in particular behave in these contexts, as recommended in the literature (Baek & Bullock, 2014; Del Rey et al., 2015; Macháková et al., 2013; Ortega, Elipse, & Calmaestra, 2009).

Research has shown that bystanders have an increasingly important role in cyberbullying, since they can be many due to the global impact of the Internet (Ball, 2007; Kraft, 2011). For Francisco and colleagues (2015), studying bystanders and their behavior towards cyberbullying is important for understanding the phenomenon in order to take evidence-based measures towards its resolution. Due to its gravity and complex nature, cyberbullying needs to be approached with empirically validated guidelines for intervention and prevention (Del Rey et al., 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Moreover, since individuals who experience cyberbullying are at a greater risk of

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experiencing negative emotions than individuals who experience traditional bullying, the importance of dealing with this phenomenon is increased (Gimenez-Gualdo, Hunter, Durkin, Arnaiz, & Maquilón, 2015). Furthermore, since the number of bystanders in cyberbullying is much larger than in bullying, more research is needed to understand the specific characteristics of these individuals (Na, Dancy, & Park, 2015).

In this study, we investigated whether student bystander intervention can influence the relationship between being a bystander of a cyberbullying incident and being the victim or the aggressor. We aimed to understand whether the probability of these roles overlapping is somehow influenced by whether individuals try to intervene. Moreover, since cyberbullying is a worldwide phenomenon, we aimed to understand whether cultural aspects may influence this relationship as well as the specific behavior presented by bystanders. To be precise, whether they noticed incidents of cyberbullying and interpreted these events as an emergency and which actions they determined as being appropriate in providing assistance. We argue that this study may provide an important contribution to the field of investigating cyberbullying because it focuses on the role of bystanders from a cross-cultural perspective and on how they may become a victim or an aggressor themselves, depending on whether or not they take action.

In the following sections, we present the theoretical framework that enabled us to formulate the hypotheses. Then, we present the moderation analyses that allowed us to conclude that bystanders who intervene, are less likely to become a victim or an aggressor themselves, and that there are cultural differences in how this behavior unfolds.

1.1. Bystander behavior in cyberbullying and hypotheses

Cyberbullying aggressions may remain online for extended periods of time and may be accessed frequently at any time by the victims and their schoolmates (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Hence, the number of bystanders can gradually increase, prolonging and increasing the victims' distress (Kubiszewski, Fontaine, Potard, & Auzoult, 2015). Furthermore, the reactions of victims may influence others' behavior (Ortega et al., 2009) and create opportunities for the bystanders to experience feelings of empathy and/or remorse (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Sokol, Bussey, & Rapee, 2015).

The roles in cyberbullying may sometimes overlap because some victims of cyberbullying may also bully others (Dehue, 2013; Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013). In fact, research has found that there is an interaction between the experience of being the aggressor and that of being the victim (Walrave & Heirman, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Victims of cyberbullying may experience feelings of helplessness and isolation which may prompt them to sustain behavior of aggression and feelings of anger and/or revenge towards their aggressor or other people (Ak, Ozdemir, & Kuzucu, 2015; Barlińska et al., 2013). The dynamics of the relationships between the experience of being an aggressor or the victim of cyberbullying could thus influence bystanders' behavior (Barlińska et al., 2013).

Knowing how to react as a bystander of cyberbullying is different from being a bystander of traditional bullying. Inactive behavior online may be to some degree positive since it can prevent the dissemination of negative posts or messages and thus, prevent the expansion of the incident to other bystanders (Barlińska et al., 2013).

How bystanders behave within the context of cyberbullying may depend on numerous social aspects, such as the bystander effect, defined by Darley and Latane (1968) as a psychological

phenomenon that occurs in individuals in severe situations where they do not help the victim, specifically because the presence of others hinders them from intervening. The bystander effect could be attributed to the diffusion of responsibility (the more bystanders there are, the less responsible each individual feels) and social influence (bystanders monitor the behavior of other bystanders to determine how to act). Latane and Darley developed and tested the Bystander Intervention Model (1970) to understand whether and how bystanders choose to intervene in emergency incidents. This model consists of five steps, including (1) noticing that something has occurred, (2) interpreting whether the event is an emergency situation, (3) taking personal responsibility in intervening, (4) determining appropriate action, and lastly, (5) providing assistance.

In cyberbullying in particular, the fact that communication is mediated by digital devices, individuals gain a sense of online anonymity, making them more susceptible to bystander behavior that is not pro-social (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In fact, online interaction enables deindividuation – a loss of self-awareness in groups (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952) and a decrease in the sense of responsibility (McKenna, 2008), which in turn, may lead to Internet disinhibition (Joinson, 1998), consisting of the loss of self-control in social behavior and interaction (Suler, 2004).

In an experimental study, Dillon and Bushman (2015) studied the first step of Latane and Darley (1970) Bystander Intervention Model in a virtual environment. The authors found that noticing a cyberbullying incident significantly predicted whether the bystanders intervened directly or indirectly. Thus, Dillon and Bushman (2015) posited that more research is needed to investigate how the Bystander Intervention Model as a whole can provide a deeper understanding of how bystanders behave in the virtual world. Since the authors only focused on the first step of the model, we used the whole model for the current study to fully understand how intervention may occur.

Authors such as Barlińska et al. (2013) aimed to identify variables that could influence bystander behavior in incidents of cyberbullying. The authors posited that the characteristics of online interaction may trigger impulsive behavior and increase the tendency for bystander behavior to sustain cyberbullying aggressions. Hence, they found that negative bystander behavior was more prone to occur in online interaction than in face-to-face contact, and that bystander behavior was significantly influenced by previous experiences of cyberbullying. Lastly, they found that negative bystander behavior tends to decrease when bystanders empathize with the victim's pain in incidents of cyberbullying. Other authors, such as Batson et al. (1997) and Galinsky, Ku, and Wang (2005) had also studied and confirmed the importance of cognitive empathy in reducing negative behavior. Nonetheless, Barlińska et al. (2013) measured cyberbullying bystander behavior in a specific Internet environment, namely through an instant messenger simulation, thus limiting the possibility of predicting how participants would respond in different Internet settings. In our study, we required participants to consider all of the potential Internet settings in which the cyberbullying incidents occurred.

Some of the literature highlights that bystanders may have distinct behaviors (Carter, 2013). These behaviors may be proactive in favor of the victim, where support to the victim is offered, by contacting and defending them directly (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), by responding directly to the aggressor (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010), and also, by enabling the diffusion of information regarding possible interventions. Bastiaensens et al. (2015) studied bystanders' behavioral intentions and examined how the contextual variables of the (cyber)bullying incident (severity, identity, and behavior of other bystanders) influenced the type of interaction and privacy of bystanders' intentions to help. The authors found

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