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How do victims react to cyberbullying on social networking sites? The influence of previous cyberbullying victimization experiences

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how teenagers' past victim experiences might influence their bystander behaviors when teenagers witness cyberbullying on social networking sites (SNSs). An analysis of 622 teenage SNS users' responses in the Pew Internet Survey showed that at least 16.6% of the teenagers had previously been cyberbullied on SNSs. Those who had been victims of cyberbullying reported more antisocial reaction strategies than nonvictims. Meanwhile, girls were more likely to perform prosocial bystander behaviors, whereas boys tended to behave more antisocially. Girls who had been cyberbullied claimed to adopt more prosocial bystander behaviors than male victims. Teenagers who had more online social interactions had more prosocial bystander reactions, compared to those who interacted less online. Empathy and reciprocity were discussed as the mechanisms for teenagers' prosocial and antisocial reaction strategies.

1. Introduction

Cyberbullying, a significant public health issue, has attracted the attention of scholars since this issue occurs frequently and may cause victims emotional distress and lower their self-esteem (e.g., Aricak et al., 2008; Campbell, 2005; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Hamby & Finkelhor, 2000; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, 2004). In particular, since social networking sites (SNSs) are a popular platform for teenagers to express themselves and to socialize with others (Barker, 2009; Livingstone, 2008; Pfeil, Arjan, & Zaphiris, 2009), cyberbullying occurs frequency on these platforms (e.g., Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014a, 2014b; O'Dea & Campbell, 2012). Recent research has shown that heavy SNS users are more likely to encounter cyberbullying and be affected by insulting messages (Kwan & Skoric, 2013). Bystander behaviors have been emphasized on SNSs, as bystanders or witnesses appear to be a large group involved in cyberbullying (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Lenhart et al., 2011). Scholars have discovered that bystanders may contribute to the bullying frequency by participating in the aggression and directing the ongoing situation in a more harmful or antisocial direction or ameliorate the victimization by defending the victims, leading the hostile behaviors in a helpful or prosocial direction (Rigby & Johnson, 2006; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996; Twemlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004). The determinants of bystanders' behaviors have long been investigated; however, to our knowledge, the role of previous victimization experiences in teenagers' bystander behaviors has not been thoroughly examined.

The aim of this study is thus to investigate how victimization behaviors may influence teenagers' reaction strategies when the teenagers witness others cyberbullying on SNSs. Insights from different perspectives provide inconsistent predictions. The similarity between cyberbullying situations may trigger teenagers' resentment from previous victimization experiences, and increase their likelihood of harming others. However, since victims can better empathize on the potential suffering than nonvictims, the victimization experience may lead to teenagers saving others from being hurt. These two lines of thoughts are at odds. Therefore, in this study we empirically predicted previous victims' bystander reaction strategies. The findings have implications for providing psychological support for cyberbullying victims.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, a term coined by Belsey (2005), is defined as an individual or a group intentionally and repeatedly using electronic devices or technologies to conduct hostile or aggressive behaviors. Cyberbullying is also considered "a way of emotionally distressing

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somebody over technology," according to a recent study from teenagers' perspectives (Bowler, Knobel, & Mattern, 2015). Cyberbullying, similar to its offline version, often presents as mean and cruel behaviors. The most common cyberbullying behaviors include spreading rumors, revealing personal information or photos without permission, sending threatening messages, and publicly making fun of someone (e.g., Baas, De Jong, & Drossaert, 2013; Chang et al., 2013; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011).

Studies have indicated that cyberbullying is a significant issue for teenagers all around the world (Kraft, 2006), although the prevalence in different countries varies. For example, in the United States, Patchin and Hinduja (2010) investigated 1963 students and found that nearly 30% of the respondents had been victims of certain forms of cyberbullying two or more times within the previous 30 days. Similarly, a study conducted with a Turkish population showed that 27% of the 372 participating students had been victims of cyberbullying (Arslan, Savaser, Hallett, & Balci, 2012). Brewer and Kerslake (2015) found that 16.22% of British adolescents aged between 16 and 18 reported being cyberbullied more than once during the previous six months.

Studies have also shown that cyberbullying on SNSs is not uncommon. Wiederhold and Riva conducted an online survey to examine the relationship between SNS use and cyberbullying. Of the 400 participants, SNS users reported a significantly higher frequency of having experienced cyberbullying compared to nonusers. In addition, a recent study showed that 67.4% of respondents ($N = 808$) witnessed cyberbullying behaviors on SNSs (Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014).

In cyberbullying, victims, bullies, and bystanders are the main actors (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). Among them, cyberbullying victims have attracted broad scholarly attention, as victimization experiences have been found to be associated with damaging outcomes (e.g., Campbell, 2005; David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Tokunaga, 2010). Victims often suffer from undesirable psychosocial consequences (Ttofi & Farrington, 2008), such as frustration, depression, and fear (e.g., Aricak et al., 2008; Campbell, 2005; Tokunaga, 2010). More seriously, a growing number of teenagers have committed suicide after being cyberbullied (e.g., Alvarez, 2013). Studies also indicated that the role of bystanders in cyberbullying should not be ignored (DeSmet et al., 2013). Due to the large population of users and prevalence of cyberbullying on SNSs, previous cyberbullying victims often find themselves in the position of bystanders.

2.2. Bystander behaviors in cyberbullying situations

Bystander behavior refers to the action an individual adopts when he or she sees or hears a problematic or emergency situation (Banyard, 2008). The term emphasizes an individual's position as a witness to a special situation, instead of someone who is involved. In line with the literature on offline bullying, bystanders are important actors, as their reactions may either enhance or attenuate the harmful behaviors (DeSmet et al., 2013; Twemlow et al., 2004). In offline settings, when witnessing an aggressive behavior, bystanders' roles can be generally divided into two categories: defenders, who stop the bullying behaviors, help victims, or ask for adults' intervention (Pozzoli & Gini, 2010), and passive bystanders, who silently witness what is happening and ignore the ongoing bullying behavior (Obermann, 2011; Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012; Salmivalli et al., 1996). Bystanders seldom join in the bullying behaviors in traditional bullying situations; however, some studies have indicated that participation behaviors make cyberbullying very distinctive from offline bullying (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

When cyberbullying occurs publicly on SNSs, four primary types of onlooker behaviors often occur (Carlo, Roesch, & Melby, 1998): telling the perpetrators to stop cyberbullying (prosocial), comforting the victims (prosocial), joining in the cyberbullying (antisocial), or just ignoring it (indifferent). Prosocial bystander behaviors refer to actions that are beneficial for victims and society as a whole, such as acting as a defender of victims and reporting the perpetrators; whereas antisocial behaviors may cause damage to others and the society, such as acting as reinforcers or cyberbully assistants (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). Prosocial behaviors are the opposite of antisocial behaviors; however, the two types of behavior do not have to be mutually exclusive. A person is likely to perform prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Coping in a prosocial way often results from bystanders' feeling sympathy for others, feeling guilty about the wrongdoing, and exercising self-control before doing something wrong (Barrett, 1998). In addition, studies have shown that altruism and empathy are fundamental drives or impulses for humans to behave prosocially (e.g., Twemlow et al., 2004). Although prosocial bystander behaviors sometimes require personal sacrifices, certain individual characteristics, situational factors, and psychological mechanisms often make the behaviors possible (Moore, Barresi, & Thompson, 1998). In contrast, antisocial bystander behaviors abet cyberbullies and strengthen the pain the victims suffer. Antisocial behaviors are labeled as deviance and contravene social norms or even violate laws (Ang & Goh, 2010). Although antisocial behaviors are socially undesirable, teenagers perform antisocial bystander behaviors for different reasons, such as, peer influence, violent TV viewing experiences, and leisure activities (Olweus, 1989).

2.3. Previous victimization experiences

Scholars have recognized multiple factors to predict individuals' bystander behaviors (DeSmet et al., 2013), such as personality (Bollmer, Harris, & Milich, 2006), motivation (Michelini, Wilson, & Messé, 1975), religious faith (e.g., Hardy & Carlo, 2005), perceived efficacy, perceived source sufficiency (Roth & Cohen, 1986), and social cognitive skills (e.g., Dodge, 1980). However, little is known about the role of previous victimization experiences in teenagers' prosocial or antisocial bystander behaviors (Carlo et al., 1998). People are always influenced by their previous experiences. Teenagers with previous victimization experiences tend to differ from nonvictims in behavioral trajectories (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Storch & Ledley, 2005). Many studies have shown similar, if not more severe, psychological maladjustment for cyberbullying victims than traditional bullying. Victims often suffer psychosocial problems and affective disorders (e.g., Craig, 1998; Wang et al., 2011). Victimization might also lead to externalized hostility and delinquency (Tokunaga, 2010). In some serious cases, victims have reported carrying weapons on campus (Arseneault et al., 2006). Although cyberbullying, as an online form, might not lead to physical attacks, the psychological mechanism of taking revenge might be similar. Some scholars have suggested that teenage victims might tend to retaliate against others for what they have suffered, in order to make themselves feel more balanced (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Tokunaga, 2010; Zajonc & Burnstein, 1965). Victims are less likely to participate in prosocial behaviors; instead, teenagers who have been cyberbullied may transfer what they have undergone to others, resulting in antisocial behaviors.

However, teenagers are apt to be more sympathetic if they have experienced unpleasant cybervictimization behaviors in the past. Some studies suggested that teenage cyberbullying victims were more likely to help other victims (e.g., Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Studies have also shown that people who were empathetic were likely to engage in prosocial behaviors (e.g., Ang & Goh, 2010; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). In addition, individuals were also found to be more likely to help those who seem similar to them (e.g.,