Cyberbullying on social network sites. An experimental study into bystanders' behavioural intentions to help the victim or reinforce the bully

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying on social network sites poses a significant threat to the mental and physical health of victimized adolescents. Although the role of bystanders in solving bullying instances has been demonstrated repeatedly in research on traditional bullying, their role in cyberbullying remains relatively understudied. Therefore, we set up an experimental scenario study in order to examine the influence of contextual factors (severity of the incident, identity and behaviour of other bystanders) on bystanders' behavioural intentions to help the victim or reinforce the bully in cases of harassment on Facebook. Four hundred and fifty-three second year students of Flemish secondary schools participated in the study. The results on the one hand showed that bystanders had higher behavioural intentions to help the victim when they witnessed a more severe incident. Incident severity also interacted with other bystanders' identity in influencing behavioural intentions to help the victim. On the other hand, bystanders had higher behavioural intentions to join in the bullying when other bystanders were good friends rather than acquaintances. In addition, an interaction effect was found between other bystanders' identity and behaviour on behavioural intentions to join in the bullying. Furthermore, both helping and reinforcing behavioural intentions differed according to gender.

1. Introduction: cyberbullying on social network sites (SNS)

Information- and communication technologies (ICT) offer this generation of youngsters ample opportunities to communicate with peers. However, in their social interactions via ICT youngsters can be confronted with undesirable phenomena such as cyberbullying. The large-scale EU Kids Online study on internet safety (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Olafsson, 2011) revealed that 9% of children between nine and sixteen years old had been bullied through the internet or mobile phones within the past year, while 5% had bullied others. Other studies in various countries, however, have reported higher prevalence rates: on average 24% for cyberbullying victimization and 18% for perpetration (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Cyberbullying victimization has been related to numerous negative health consequences, such as depression (e.g. Kowalski & Fedina, 2011; Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012), emotional distress (e.g. Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012; Şahin, 2012; Šléglová & Černá, 2011) and in extreme cases even self-harming behaviour (Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012) and suicide attempts (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). We can therefore conclude that cyberbullying poses a significant threat for adolescents' mental and physical health.

Nowadays, social network sites (SNS) are very popular amongst teenagers (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007; Livingstone et al., 2011), and we can see that these sites form a common venue for cyberbullying (Livingstone et al., 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). The important role of SNS in cyberbullying has led researchers to examine the prevalence of perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying on SNS (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Nevertheless, the largest group involved in cyberbullying on SNS appears to be the bystanders or witnesses of cyberbullying incidents: Lenhart et al. (2011) found that 88% of US social-media using teens had witnessed harassment on SNS, while 15% had been victimized and 19% had harassed someone on SNS. They also investigated bystanders' reactions towards harassment on SNS. A variety of reactions was

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found: 80% of bystanders had defended the victim (at least once in a while) and 79% indicated that they had told the bully to stop. In contrast, 91% indicated that they had just ignored what was going on and 21% had even joined in the bullying (Lenhart et al., 2011). The latter data, however, do not provide insight in the reasons why bystanders act or intend to act in a certain way when witnessing cyberbullying on SNS, insight which is essential in order to promote bystander behaviour aimed at helping the victim and discourage behaviour that reinforces the bully. Bystanders' behaviour or behavioural intentions could for example be influenced by personal characteristics of the bystanders themselves (e.g. socio-demographic characteristics, personality, attitudes, norms), but also by contextual characteristics, such as features of the cyberbullying incident and characteristics of other people involved in the incident (the bully, other bystanders). In order to shed light on the latter category of characteristics, we set up an experimental design through which we investigated the influence of contextual characteristics of a harassing incident on SNS on bystanders' behavioural intentions to help the victim or reinforce the bully.

2. Role of bystanders in cyberbullying on SNS

Research on traditional bullying has shown that bystanders are important actors in bullying instances. Since perpetrators often engage in bullying to achieve a higher status, exert dominance, gain prestige or demonstrate social power in the peer group, they are dependent on the members of this peer group – the bystanders – to achieve their goal (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009). Bystanders can respond to incidents of bullying in roughly three different ways: remaining an outsider, assisting or reinforcing the bully and supporting or defending the victim (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). When bystanders reinforce the bully by giving positive feedback, they are rewarding the bully for his or her behaviour, which can make the bully become increasingly aggressive (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010). In addition, research on traditional bullying has shown that reinforcing behaviours by bystanders are associated with a higher frequency of bullying incidents in classrooms (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Positive feedback can be awarded by joining in the bullying, but also by showing the bully you approve of it. Sometimes observing and passively standing by can even provide the bully with positive feedback (O'Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996). At the same time, reinforcing the bully will cause the victim to experience increased negative effects, such as higher anxiety, depression and lower self-esteem (Salmivalli, 2010). Contrarily, bystanders can take sides with the victim, which can threaten the bully's status and as such make the bully decide to stop (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). Bystanders can do this by trying to stop the bully (O'Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli et al., 1996) and by supporting the victim, so as to buffer negative effects caused by bullying victimization (Salmivalli, 2010).

Although cyberbullying is related to traditional bullying, the specific characteristics of the ICT used can influence bullying dynamics and consequently also bystander behaviour. First, adolescents using SNS can be confronted with cyberbullying within but also outside of their own social circle, partly because of SNS characteristics (the ability to see public content and sometimes also content made by "friends-of-friends") and because SNS are often used to connect with so-called "weak ties" and sometimes even with strangers (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). As such, a bystander can have different types of relationships with the people involved in a cyberbullying incident, which can cause dynamics that can influence the bystander's response. Secondly, the techno-

logical applications integrated in SNS grant bystanders the opportunity to react to cyberbullying incidents through text- and picture-based communication or even just by clicking a button (e.g. the "I like" button or the report button). Besides these SNS applications, which are used for more public communication (for others to see), bystanders also have the opportunity to react through other ICT that allow more private (one-to-one) communication, for instance mobile phones, instant messenger and e-mail. Evidently, bystanders can also still choose to respond to cyberbullying on SNS by communicating with those involved in "the real world", in private or when others are present, creating a whole range of possible responses to cyberbullying incidents on SNS.

3. Determinants of bystander behaviour in cases of cyberbullying on SNS

In order to understand bystander behaviour in bullying, scholars until now have mainly complemented research on socio-demographic and psychological/personality determinants with an examination of the socio-cognitive processes that determine bystander behaviour (Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, Under review). With regard to socio-cognitive processes, cyberbullying research has investigated the influence of empathy (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013), emotions and group norms (Jones, Manstead, & Livingstone, 2011), and beliefs (Li & Fung, 2012) on bystander behaviour. However, until now little attention has been paid to *contextual determinants*, caused by characteristics of the cyberbullying incident itself and the other actors involved.

3.1. Severity of the cyberbullying incident

First, in a focus group study on cyberbullying, adolescents reported the cognitive perception of the cyberbullying incident itself, more specifically the perceived *severity of the incident,* as an important factor in their bystander behaviour. Adolescents appeared to be more inclined to help the victim when a cyberbullying instance was considered as severe (DeSmet et al., 2012). However, this finding has not yet been confirmed by cross-sectional or experimental research. Therefore, we will further investigate the influence of the severity of the incident by comparing bystander reactions to more severe and less severe instances of SNS harassment in an experimental design. We expect that bystanders will be more likely to help in a more severe harassing incident on SNS and in an analogous way we hypothesise that bystanders will be less likely to reinforce the bully when confronted with such a severe incident.

H1. Bystanders who are exposed to a more severe harassing incident on SNS, will have higher behavioural intentions to help the victim and lower behavioural intentions to reinforce the bully, compared to bystanders who are exposed to a less severe harassing incident on SNS.

3.2. Other bystanders

Research on traditional bullying (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012) and cyberbullying (DeSmet et al., 2012) has investigated the influence of the bystander's relationship with the victim or the perpetrator on subsequent behavioural intentions. However, to the best of our knowledge, the *influence of other bystanders* who are present in cyberbullying incidents has not been studied yet. Since bullying events on SNS potentially have a large number of bystanders, the presence of these other bystanders is likely to be (consciously or unconsciously) experienced and cognitively processed by bystanders (Latané & Darley, 1970; Thornberg, 2007).