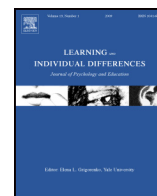




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## Helping behavior among adolescent bystanders of cyberbullying: The role of impulsivity

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## ABSTRACT

Impulsivity has a significant impact on behavior during adolescence. Moreover, previous research has shown associations between impulsivity (or low self-control) and perpetration and victimization of cyberbullying. However, the influence of impulsivity on bystander behavior has not been investigated yet, although bystanders play an important role in bullying situations. The present study examined the relationship between impulsivity and helping behavior in bystanders of cyberbullying. To predict the likelihood of helping a victim when witnessing cyberbullying, we collected self-reported data from a representative sample of 2309 pupils, aged 9 to 17. The results suggested that more impulsive adolescents were less likely to help the cybervictim. An explanation for the findings may be that helping behavior in a cyberbullying context requires inhibitory abilities which are deficit in impulsive adolescents. These findings could be used to inform intervention strategies about which factors are associated with bystander behavior in cyberbullying and how to target these.

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### 1. Introduction

Digital media are of primary importance in the lives of many adolescents. Recent findings show that 55% of European children access the internet daily from their bedroom and 17% do this daily when they are out and about (Mascheroni & Cuman, 2014). Digital media provide children with opportunities, but also expose them to risks. One of these risks is cyberbullying: “An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him- or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). Cyberbullying perpetration and victimization can be associated with various psychosocial problems, such as low self-esteem, psychological distress, anxiety, depression and school problems (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013; Cénat et al., 2014; Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Therefore, countering cyberbullying and its consequences is crucial. In this respect, research on traditional bullying has revealed the important role of peer bystanders (Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011): Bystanders can help victims by defending them, by comforting them or by offering advice. Yet, to date, knowledge about bystander reactions towards cyberbullying victims is rather limited. In this study, we explore the characteristics of bystanders that may influence their helping behavior towards cyberbullying victims. We are particularly interested

in the role of impulsivity: Especially during adolescence this personality facet significantly influences behavior, as it plays an important role in the development of problem behavior (Levesque, 2012).

#### 1.1. Impulsivity and (cyber)bullying victimization and perpetration

Impulsivity is “a predisposition toward rapid, unplanned reactions to internal or external stimuli without regard to the negative consequences of these reactions to the impulsive individual or to others” (Moeller, Barratt, Dougherty, Schmitz, & Swann, 2001, p. 1784). Impulsivity (or lack of self-control) (Duckworth & Kern, 2011) has been linked to victimization and perpetration of traditional and cyberbullying. Individuals who score higher on impulsivity or lower on self-control are more prone to be victims or perpetrators of traditional and cyberbullying (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Jenkins, Demaray, Fredrick, & Summers, 2014; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2015; Vazsonyi, Macháčková, Sevcikova, Smahel, & Cerna, 2012).

#### 1.2. Impulsivity in bystander behavior

Whereas studies have researched the association of impulsivity with cyberbullying victimization and perpetration, impulsivity's relation to bystander behavior in bullying situations has not been investigated to date. Studying the role of impulsivity in cyberbullying bystander behavior is valuable, however. First, as in traditional bullying, bystanders are also often present during cyberbullying situations, although they might play a different role (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013; Williford et al., 2013). For instance, bystanders in traditional bullying

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are present at the moment of the incident, whereas this is not necessarily the case in cyberbullying: Bystanders can witness cyberbullying incidents (long) after the actual messaging or posting online took place. As long as the material is still online or circulating, bystanders have the option to react (Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Moreover, whereas bystanders in traditional bullying are physically present and visible, cyberbystanders may be invisible. In addition, the size of the audience and the number of bystanders can be much larger in cyberbullying (Heirman et al., 2016), and the relational proximity of the audience to the involved individuals is often greater (witnesses can easily be strangers). Second, as in traditional bullying, bystanders of cyberbullying can show three types of reactions, which can alter the consequences for the victim and the perpetrator (Bastiaensens et al., 2014): (1) (Active) negative bystander behavior: reinforcing the cyberbully, joining in on or encouraging the cyberbullying; (2) (Active) positive bystander behavior: helping or defending the victim, standing up against the cyberbully, asking for help, reporting the incident or comforting or supporting the victim; and (3) Passive bystander behavior: doing nothing or pretending to ignore the situation. These broadly defined categories can be refined into smaller categories (e.g., DeSmet et al., 2014).

Which type of reaction a bystander chooses, depends on contextual and personal factors. Regarding contextual factors, direct requests for help from the victim (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013), incident severity (Bastiaensens et al., 2014), other bystanders' identity (good friends vs. acquaintances, Bastiaensens et al., 2014), the bystander's popularity (DeSmet et al., 2014), the victim's reactions (Holfeld, 2014), witnessing others behaving prosocially (Niblack, 2013), and parental monitoring (Niblack, 2013) have been related to positive bystander behavior. As for person-related factors, noticing the incident (Freis & Gurung, 2013), feeling upset by witnessing victimization (Macháčková et al., 2013), the relationship with the victim (DeSmet et al., 2014; Macháčková et al., 2013), low moral disengagement (DeSmet et al., 2014), general prosocial tendencies (Macháčková et al., 2013), personal experience with cyberbully victimization (Niblack, 2013), and positive beliefs about cyberspace (Li & Fung, 2012) were all found to be positively related to positive bystander behavior. In contrast, a strong relation with the bully seems to inhibit positive bystander behavior (Macháčková et al., 2013). Despite these insights, impulsivity's role in cyberbullying bystander behavior has not received attention so far. Given the association of impulsivity with cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, this personality factor might however also be relevant for cyberbystanders, and particularly regarding their helping behavior.

In this study we focus on helping behavior, because of its direct influence on the negative effects of cybervictimization. In particular, when bystanders take sides with the cybervictim, they send a signal that the victim is not alone and that the cyberbullying act is wrong. In addition, by providing social support, bystanders can attenuate the negative effects of victimization (Brody, 2013; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009).

### 1.3. The role of impulsivity in helping behavior

Impulsivity consists of two central facets: sensitivity to reward or drive, and disinhibition (Levesque, 2012). Disinhibition refers to unrestrained behavior, which may be particularly relevant in bystander and helping behavior. Disinhibition has mostly been linked to behaving antisocially, yet could also trigger prosocial behavior (Hirsh, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011; Steele, Critchlow, & Liu, 1985). For instance, when disinhibited by alcohol intoxication, some people become more aggressive while others behave more helpful. How individuals behave depends on the most salient response option in a situation, which is influenced by dispositional and contextual factors (Hirsh et al., 2011). Because of their dispositionally high levels of disinhibition, impulsive individuals may generally experience less response conflict in social

situations (Hirsh et al., 2011). When witnessing a cyberbullying incident, helping the victim may or may not be the most salient response option.

Thus, one possibility is that impulsivity relates negatively to adolescents' cyberbystander helping behavior. This would be in line with research linking impulsivity to more antisocial and less prosocial behavior (e.g. Andrade & Tannock, 2012, Diamantopoulou, Henricsson, & Rydell, 2005, McMahon et al., 2013, Ohan & Johnston, 2007). Furthermore, research on traditional bullying bystander behavior suggests that children who defend victims are better at inhibiting default, intuitive responses than children who bully (Monks, Smith, & Swettenham, 2005). In other words, helpers have lower levels of disinhibition than bullies. Moreover, this seems to suggest that bystander helping behavior is not an intuitive, dominant response option. In fact, Eisenberg, Fabes, and Spinrad (2006) argue that helping (or prosocial) behavior often requires self-regulating, inhibition and reflection abilities. Consequently, impulsive adolescents may have more difficulty to engage in helping behavior than non-impulsive adolescents.

Another possibility is that impulsivity relates positively to cyberbystander helping behavior. When bystanders help a victim, this might have negative consequences for both parties: Bystanders may become victims themselves (DeSmet et al., 2012) or they may embarrass the victim (Thornberg, 2007). These negative consequences are often cited by passive bystanders as reasons for not helping. However, impulsive individuals do not consider the consequences of their actions for themselves or others before reacting (Moeller et al., 2001). Therefore, they could be more likely to help when witnessing cyberbullying, if they would help impulsively without regard for the possible negative consequences. Piliavin, Piliavin, and Rodin (1975) have similarly argued that impulsive helping, or immediate helping that does not seem to involve a conscious decision-making process, happens under specific circumstances or when bystanders have specific traits. However, it remains unclear whether impulsivity as a personality trait suffices to induce a higher likelihood to help.

### 1.4. Other factors related to bystander behavior in cyberbullying and impulsivity

Impulsivity may be an important factor related to cyberbystander behavior. However, other personal characteristics also influence this behavior. Previous research has documented associations of age, gender and empathy with bystander behavior and impulsivity.

#### 1.4.1. Age & gender

Findings about the association of bystander behavior with gender and age are mixed. Only Bastiaensens et al. (2014) reported a significant gender difference: Girls had a higher tendency to display positive, and boys to display negative bystander behavior. Other studies did not find a significant gender effect (Barlińska et al., 2013; Bastiaensens et al., 2015; Li & Fung, 2012; Macháčková et al., 2013; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Research on the relationship between gender and impulsivity suggests a weak or inconsistent association (Cross, Copping, & Campbell, 2011).

Regarding age, Van Cleemput et al. (2014) found that older adolescents were more likely to show negative and passive, and less likely to show positive bystander behavior. In contrast, age was not a significant predictor in two other studies (Bastiaensens et al., 2015; Macháčková et al., 2013). Research on age-effects in impulsivity suggests that adolescence is characterized by high impulsivity, due to developmental changes in neural functions (Gullo & Dawe, 2008). To account for possible age or gender effects, these variables are included as controls in our analysis.

#### 1.4.2. Empathy

Of the several personality factors that have been linked to cyberbullying, empathy consistently emerges as an important predictor.

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