



Adolescent bystanders' perspectives of aggression in the online versus school environments[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Researchers' understanding of bystanders' perspectives in the cyber-environment fails to take young people's perceptions into account and remains imperfect. Interventions encouraging adolescents to help targets of cyber-aggression are therefore typically based upon traditional school-based aggression research. Twenty-four in-depth interviews with Australian 13–16 year-olds revealed two themes that reflect how young bystanders perceive differences between aggression online and at school. The *physical presence* theme suggests that young bystanders struggle to determine online intentions in the absence of body language, leading to hesitancy in reactions and furthermore make it easier for them to ignore online transgressions and avoid becoming involved. The *authority theme* indicates young bystanders perceive that, compared to the school environment, the online environment lacks clearly established rules, authority figures and formal reporting mechanisms. These differences indicate that unique strategies should be developed to encourage young bystanders to intervene in cyber-aggression situations.

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Childhood exposure to aggression, especially in school settings, can have serious negative psychosocial and academic outcomes (Cross et al., 2009; Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010). Aggression can be defined as “a purposeful act intended to cause harm to somebody who does not wish to be harmed” (Smith, del Barrio, & Tokunaga, 2013, p. 26). This definition is equally applicable to harm of both a physical and psychological nature. Students who are targets of aggressive acts can experience negative self-perceptions, lower self-esteem, higher absenteeism, depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Cross et al. 2009). Student aggressors are also at elevated risk of maladaptive social behaviours, alcohol dependency, depression and suicidal ideation in adulthood (Perren et al. 2010). However, aggressive behaviours undertaken in the school environment usually involve more than simply a perpetrator and target interacting in isolation. Rather they occur within a broader social environment that often includes witnesses or ‘bystanders’ who can influence the dynamic in either a positive or negative way (Obermann, 2011). Peer bystanders are present in an estimated 85–88% of all face-to-face aggressive incidents and influence both duration and prevalence (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). Previous research suggests peer intervention can stop face-to-face bullying within 10 s (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). Therefore,

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harnessing positive peer bystander influence has become an important component of school-based violence prevention programs (Campbell, 2005; Kärnä, Voeten, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2010; Porter & Smith-Adcock, 2011; Salmivalli et al., 2011).

Bystander behaviour first gained prominence through the seminal work of Latane and Darley in the 1960s who identified an inverse relationship between bystander group size and the likelihood of an individual intervening (Latane & Darley 1968; Latane & Nida, 1981). Latane and his colleagues explored the complex processes required by bystanders to intervene during unfamiliar and ambiguous emergency situations and proposed a five-step decision-making model that bystanders progress through before deciding on a course of action. The five-steps include: 1) noticing that something is wrong in the situation; 2) recognising that the situation requires intervention; 3) determining their level of personal responsibility to intervene; 4) deciding how to intervene; and 5) having the capacity to implement the chosen intervention (Latane & Darley, 1968; Latane & Nida, 1981; Stueve et al., 2006; Thornberg, 2010). At each step of the decision-making process bystanders may be deterred from intervening by misinterpreting the situation, denying responsibility, and/or lacking the knowledge or skills to intervene in an effective manner (Stueve et al., 2006). Early studies focussed on the frequency of bystanders providing assistance in a range of emergency situations. This focus broadened to examine bystander responses in a range of social situations, including bullying and aggressive behaviour in school environments (Bellmore, Ma, You, & Hughes, 2012; Fischer et al., 2011; Schwartz & Gottlieb, 1980; Stueve et al., 2006; Thornberg, 2007, 2010). However, very little research has been undertaken to investigate bystander behaviours in the relatively recent phenomenon of 'cyber-aggression', defined as "a behaviour aimed at harming another person using electronic communications that is perceived as aversive by the target" (Bauman, Underwood, & Card, 2012, p. 41).

It is speculated that peer bystanders can play an equally important role in interventions that address cyber-aggression in the online social environment (Campbell, 2005; Cross, Li, Smith, & Monks, 2012; Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005). Authors, however, disagree whether cyber-aggression should be considered a unique phenomenon in its own right and therefore require tailored approaches beyond those provided for face-to-face school-based aggression (see, e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2012; Menesini, 2012; Olweus, 2012a, 2012b; Smith, 2012).

Cyber-aggression poses a number of unique challenges to differentiate it from traditional aggressive behaviours. These include generational differences where children and adolescents often have superior knowledge and skills with information and communication technologies (ICTs) than their parents and teachers (Chi Lam & Frydenberg, 2009). It has been suggested that young people are therefore hesitant to approach adults when experiencing online aggression (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Aggressive online behaviour is also recognised for having an unrestrained audience. In many instances once a message, photograph or video has been sent, neither the sender nor target has control over its propagation; once posted on the Internet a copy can potentially exist in perpetuity and be viewed innumerable times by anyone (Langos, 2012). Likewise, the proliferation of smart phones has enabled content to be captured more easily and made more accessible allowing transfer of information (both positive and negative) to occur at faster speeds and to a target audience much greater than has previously been the case (Smith et al., 2013). Aggressive acts in cyberspace also have fewer spatial and time constraints when compared to traditional aggressive behaviours, which have not generally infiltrated the home setting (Langos, 2012; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009). Perpetrators of cyber-aggression can also hide their identity from potential targets. Anonymity can also create disinhibition in online communications, such that aggressive messages and actions may be facilitated online more than in face-to-face interactions (Brown, 2011; Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Thus many unique and important contextual differences have been suggested to differentiate cyber-from face-to-face aggression but these remain poorly understood at this time and require further investigation (Smith, 2012).

There is some evidence suggesting that bystander interventions developed for traditional bullying can also reduce cyber-aggression. Two recent, large randomised trials in Austria and Finland examined the effectiveness of traditional bullying intervention programs on self-reported rates of cyber-aggression (Gradinger, Yanagida, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2015; Williford et al., 2013). The Austrian study targeted students in Grades 5–7 (mean age = 11.7 years) and found significant reductions in reported rates of cyber-aggression (Gradinger et al., 2015). In Finland, researchers found positive results were conditional on the age of the students, with reductions in cyber-aggression for younger students participating but not for older students; once students were an average of 12.9 years, the effect of treatment condition was no longer significant (Williford et al., 2013). The results also suggested that cyber-aggression is in part a classroom phenomenon, influencing normative beliefs regarding cyber-aggression independent of other factors. Both trials provide encouraging indications that school-based aggression prevention programs can produce positive results in also reducing cyber-aggression; at least in younger adolescent populations. The Finish researchers concluded that the bystander's role in the cyber environment remained uncertain as did the necessity to incorporate additional components specifically aimed at cyber-aggression (Williford et al., 2013). Therefore, despite some positive indications (Gradinger et al., 2015; Williford et al., 2013) the evidence remains equivocal as to the extent that interventions developed for face-to-face school-based aggression are efficacious for cyber-aggression.

To date, cyber-aggression has remained a new field of empirical research with most publications consisting of expert opinion (Dooley et al., 2009; Langos, 2012) or relying upon quantitative often cross-sectional surveys featuring closed-ended questions already determined by expert assumptions (Mishna & Van Wert, 2012; Spears & Kofoed, 2013). Espinoza and Juvonen (2013) argue that better understanding of cyber-aggression can only be gained by allowing the "experiences, meanings, and views of participants" to be expressed in their own words (p. 117). Mishna and Van Wert (2012) argue qualitative approaches allow for this insight by developing rich and authentic views of cyber-aggression as 'lived' by young

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