



# Perceptions and attributions of bystanders to cyber bullying



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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Available online 11 June 2014

Keywords:  
Cyber bullying  
Bystanders  
Attribution theory  
Adolescents

## ABSTRACT

Bystanders play a critical role in the maintenance or reduction of bullying behavior. The potentially unlimited audience in the online world suggests that the role of bystanders may be particularly important in cyber bullying. However, little is known about the perceptions of bystanders or the situational factors that can increase or decrease their support for victims. In this study, bystanders' perceptions of control, attributions of responsibility and blame for a hypothetical same-gender victim of cyber bullying were examined within a blog. Participants included 1105 middle school students who were assigned to one of three experimental conditions that manipulated the victim's response (passive, active, reactive). In all conditions, a negative outcome resulted (cyber bullying continued). A  $3 \times 2$  MANCOVA tested effects of Response Type  $\times$  Gender on bystanders' perceptions and attributions. Results indicate that passive responses elicited stronger perceptions of control, attributions of responsibility and blame than active or reactive responses, particularly for male bystanders. Bystanders may be less likely to offer assistance to victims of cyber bullying who respond passively to their experience. The findings have implications for understanding the factors that can increase or decrease bystander support in real-life cyber bullying situations.

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## 1. Introduction

Socialization patterns among adolescents have changed dramatically in the last decade as a result of the growth and proliferation of electronic communication devices (e.g., Internet and cell phones). In particular, social networking sites such as Facebook have become increasingly popular for adolescents to communicate with their friends at any time of the day or night (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). An unintended consequence of the increasing access to and use of these forms of technology is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying refers to "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). Findings from reviews of the literature (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010) and several large scale studies (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Williams & Guerra, 2007) suggest that cyber bullying is a significant concern for adolescents, particularly during the middle school years. However,

large discrepancies in these reports (e.g., sampling, measurement, time frame, etc.) have made it difficult to determine the actual rate of cyber bullying among adolescents (Sabella, Patchin, & Hinduja, 2013). For example, Patchin and Hinduja (2012) reviewed the findings from 35 studies and reported that victimization rates vary between 5.5% and 72% with an average victimization rate of 24.4%. Many victims of cyber bullying also suffer psychological and emotional distress as a result of their experience (Kowalski et al., 2012; Tokunaga, 2010). In these situations, adolescents indirectly involved in the situation (e.g., bystanders) may be needed to help the victim reduce the bullying and associated distress.

The potentially unlimited audience in the online world which differentiates cyber bullying from traditional face-to-face bullying represents a unique opportunity for bystander intervention. However, a greater presence of bystanders does not necessarily relate to a greater likelihood of intervention (e.g., bystander effect; Latane & Darley, 1970). Bystanders may also believe that they do not need to assist the victim because someone else will (e.g., diffusion of responsibility). Even though bystanders play a critical role in the maintenance or reduction of bullying behavior, little is known about the perceptions of bystanders to cyber bullying or the situational factors that can increase or decrease their support for victims. To bridge these gaps in the literature, the current study utilized an attributional framework to examine the perceptions and attributions of bystanders to cyber bullying.

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The response by adolescents when they experience bullying is an important situational factor that can influence the perceptions of bystanders (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2003). Victims of cyber bullying typically respond to their experience by using 'passive' (e.g., doing nothing or trying to ignore the behavior), 'active' (e.g., reporting the behavior) or 'reactive' (e.g., confronting the bully) strategies (Africak et al., 2008; Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Mishna et al., 2010; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Passive strategies may be most effective for minor forms of cyber bullying (e.g., receiving harassing e-mail messages) whereas more active strategies are often needed for more serious forms of cyber bullying (e.g., embarrassing pictures or videos) or when the behavior persists (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Tokunaga, 2010). Responses that are ineffective or do not actually reduce the bullying can increase the level of psychological distress experienced by victims (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002) and can influence the perceptions of bystanders and their subsequent willingness to assist victims. In the current study, the response by a hypothetical victim of cyber bullying was manipulated to examine the effects on bystanders' perceptions and attributions for the victim.

## 2. The role of bystanders to traditional bullying and cyber bullying

Bullying is characterized as a group process that includes bystanders in addition to victims and bullies (Olweus, 1993; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, & Neale, 2010). Bystanders are often present during traditional bullying (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1997; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999) and can impact the outcome of the situation through their behaviors or actions as active or passive participants (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001; O'Connell et al., 1999; Pellegrini & Long, 2004; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). As active participants, adolescents can make a positive impact by attempting to stop the bullying by intervening on the victim's behalf. They can also negatively impact the situation by joining in on the bullying. Alternatively, passive participation (e.g., saying or doing nothing) by adolescents can exacerbate the problem because it signifies to the bully that their behavior is acceptable (Salmivalli, 2010; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997; Trach et al., 2010). As described by Hinduja and Patchin (2009, p. 174), "By doing nothing, bystanders are doing something".

Despite the significant presence of bystanders to traditional bullying, little is known about their response in these situations. It appears that the majority of bystanders to traditional bullying encourage or maintain the behavior by their actions in these situations (O'Connell et al., 1999; Whitney & Smith, 1993). For example, Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) reported that 17% of respondents actively tried to help the victim, 26% joined in on the bullying, and 24% remained passive observers. Similarly, Craig and Pepler (1997) found that 25% of bystanders tried to help the victim, 21% joined in on the bullying and 54% passively witnessed the behavior.

It is unclear how and to what extent the role of bystanders change from situations involving traditional bullying to cyber bullying (Mishna et al., 2010). Like traditional bullying, cyber bullying often occurs in the presence of bystanders (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Mishna et al., 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Unlike traditional bullying where bystanders have a physical presence (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Craig & Pepler, 1997; O'Connell et al., 1999; Salmivalli, 2010), bystanders to cyber bullying have a virtual and potentially anonymous presence (e.g., online). The potentially unlimited audience to witness the behavior suggests that the role of bystanders may be particularly critical for preventing and reducing cyber bullying (Mishna et al., 2010;

Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011). However, the ability of bystanders to intervene in cyber bullying is limited by the type and method of cyber bullying. For example, if an embarrassing video is posted on a social networking site in the public domain, bystanders are more likely to be present and increase their likelihood to intervene. Conversely, if the bully has direct and repeated contact with the victim (e.g., e-mails, instant messaging, etc.), often in private settings, bystanders are less likely to be present and reduces their ability to assist. To illustrate a common and realistic situation where bystanders are likely to be present, the current study utilized an example of cyber bullying behavior in a public setting (e.g., Facebook) that is popular among adolescents (Kowalski et al., 2012).

While recent investigations have focused on the characteristics of bystanders that can influence their support for victims of cyber bullying (Barlinska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013; Machackova, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013), the impact of situational factors (e.g., the victim's response) on bystanders' perceptions and attributions of cyber bullying have yet to be examined. Investigating these factors are important as they can provide insight into when bystanders are more or less likely to intervene in cyber bullying. Moreover, the findings can inform intervention efforts that focus on empowering bystanders to behave in prosocial ways when they witness cyber bullying behavior.

## 3. An attributional framework of cyber bullying

Attributions refer to the causal explanations for an event or outcome. According to Weiner's (1986) attribution theory, following a positive or negative outcome, individuals engage in a process of causal search to identify an explanation for their own or others behavior. The causal attributions used to explain the outcome are categorized by three causal dimensions: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. The locus of causality dimension distinguishes between causes that are perceived to be within a person (internal) versus outside of a person (external). The second dimension is stability and refers to whether a cause is likely to change (unstable) versus not change (stable). The third dimension is controllability and relates to whether a cause is perceived to be within one's control (controllable) versus outside of one's control (uncontrollable). Together, the causal attributions used to explain an outcome can influence one's behaviors, motivations, and emotions (Heider, 1958).

Weiner's theoretical model has been empirically tested and validated across several domains including achievement (Stupnisky, Stewart, Daniels, & Perry, 2011; Weiner, 1986, 1992) and health settings (Ruthig, Holfeld, & Hanson, 2012; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). For health-related events, control has been positively linked with responsibility and subsequent blame, particularly in situations involving a negative outcome (Weiner et al., 1988). For example, the more control an individual is perceived to have over a health issue (i.e., cancer), the more responsibility and blame that is assigned to them (Ruthig et al., 2012).

Within the context of bullying, many victims perceive that they are at least partly responsible or to blame for their experience and suggests that there some elements of controllability over the situation (Graham & Juvonen, 1998). Because bullying is considered a group process, it is plausible that bystanders share similar perceptions of controllability for bullying incidents. If bullying is perceived as controllable, more active responses by victims in these situations would be expected to elicit more favorable perceptions and attributions (i.e., less controllability, responsibility, and blame) from bystanders. However, these theoretical assumptions have not been examined within the context of cyber bullying and can shed light on the factors that relate to bystander support. For

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