Determinants of Self-Reported Bystander Behavior in Cyberbullying Incidents Amongst Adolescents

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## Sample

61 seventh, eigth, and nineth graders (aged 12–16 years, 52% girls) from three secondary schools in Flanders participated in 9 focus groups

## Implications For Educators About

Other

# Abstract

This study explores behavioral determinants of self-reported cyberbullying bystander behavior from a behav\_x0002\_ioral change theoretical perspective, to provide levers for interventions. Nine focus groups were conducted with
61 young adolescents (aged 12–16 years, 52% girls). Assertive defending, reporting to others, providing advice,
and seeking support were the most mentioned behaviors. Self-reported bystander behavior heavily depended on
contextual factors, and should not be considered a fixed participant role. Bystanders preferred to handle
cyberbullying offline and in person, and comforting the victim was considered more feasible than facing the
bully. Most prevailing behavioral determinants to defend or support the victim were low moral disengagement,
that the victim is an ingroup member, and that the bystander is popular. Youngsters felt they received little
encouragement from their environment to perform positive bystanding behavior, since peers have a high
acceptance for not defending and perceived parental support for defending behavior is largely lacking. These
results suggest multilevel models for cyberbullying research, and interventions are needed. With much previous
research into cyberbullying insufficiently founded in theoretical models, the employed framework of the
Integrative Model and Social Cognitive Theory may inspire future studies into bystander behavior.

# Outcome

"Cyberbullying is similar to offline bullying, but is heavily more dependent on contextual factors rather than reflecting a stable trait. Moral disengagement attitudes prevailed, and perceived environmental support for defending was low. The themes confirm a connection between offline bullying and cyberbullying. It often starts offline, continues online, but is preferably solved again offline. While repetition may not be necessary to define cyberbullying, it does play a role in how severe bystanders consider the incident, what action they would take and how much harm is inflicts. It also largely depended in who the victim and bully are in adopting bystander behavior. Someone with many friends will be more often nominated by his peers as a defender, while he may not necessarily always defend, for example if the victim is a loner. Self-reported ability for talking to the bully was high, but with possibly limited knowledge on how to do so.
Cyberbullies feel less need for using disengaged justifications than offline bullies due to anonymity and little confrontation with the caused harm. Possibly bystanders in cyberbullying, who have higher moral values and emotions than cyberbullies, feel more guilt and shame for not helping and need to use more moral disengagement attitudes in order to avoid self-condemnation than cyberbullies do. Bystanders had a low intention to talk to adults and teachers.
Interventions to increase positive bystander behavior in cyberbullying should make teachers more social media savvy, increase perceived parental support for bystanders, and show bystanders the harm cyberbullying inflicts. Especially for adolescents who find themselves outside of a close circle of friends, peers should be encouraged to help. Increasing the knowledge of mental health impact of cyberbullying without physical threats may
encourage adolescents to defend for nonphysical bullying types. As mental health problems associated with bullying are highest amongst cyberbullying victims, it is necessary to change adolescent beliefs about the harm that cyberbullying causes." (DeSmet et al., 2014, pp. 211-213)