Mobilizing Bystanders of Cyberbullying: 
an Exploratory Study into Behavioural Determinants of Defending the Victim

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Abstract. This study explores behavioural determinants of defending behaviour in cyberbullying incidents. Three focus groups were conducted with youngsters aged 12-16y. Major themes that were found as important behavioural determinants to defend the victim were a low moral disengagement, that the victim is an in-group member and that the bystander is popular. Bystanders preferred to handle cyberbullying offline and in person, and comforting the victim was considered more feasible than facing the bully. With a high peer acceptance of passive bystanding and lack of parental support for defending behaviour, youngsters do not receive much encouragement from their environment to exhibit defending behaviour towards victims. These preliminary results suggest befriending and peer support interventions hold promise, as well as environmental interventions with parents and teachers. These first results will need to be confirmed in more in-depth analyses and in quantitative research.

Keywords. Adolescents, cyberbullying, bystanders, behavioural determinants, Social Cognitive Theory

Introduction

Cyberbullying is an upcoming social phenomenon amongst youngsters in which bullies intentionally and repeatedly send electronic messages with hurtful content, with the aim to cause harm or embarrassment to the victim [1, 2]. Between 20 to 40% of adolescents report having been cyberbullied [1] but large variations exist in prevalence figures depending on the definition used and the studied age group. Cyberbullying has a devastating impact on the quality-of-life of victims [3, 4] and as in traditional bullying may also influence a broader group of peers, by a mechanism of co-victimization [5] or by its negative impact on perceived safety at school [6]. It can thus be considered a public health issue warranting effective interventions.

Despite some differences between traditional bullying (involving face-to-face contact between bully and victim) and cyberbullying, such as its increased anonymity, there is a substantial overlap in participant roles and behavioural determinants for these types of bullying [7, 8]. Many interventions for traditional bullying have focused on
mobilizing the bystanders to defend the victims since they have better problem-solving skills than either victim or bully and can break the chain of social reinforcement that the bully is looking for [9]. Research to date on bystanders of cyberbullying has mostly focused on prevalence rates, on reasons for not reporting [e.g. 10], and on their perceptions of cyberbullying [e.g. 11]. Others have viewed this group as mere outsiders. To our knowledge, no study so far has examined theory-driven behavioural determinants among bystanders to defend the victim. This study aims to explore behavioural determinants of defending behaviour among adolescent bystanders in cyberbullying incidents.

1. Method

A qualitative study was conducted using a series of focus groups with adolescents.

1.1. Sample and procedures

The data were collected in May 2012 from one high school in Flanders that provides general, technical and vocational education and serves a low- to middle-class population. Three focus groups were held: one with first grade pupils (12-13y), one with second grade pupils (13-14y) and one with third grade pupils (14-15y). Both youngsters and parents provided written informed consent prior to participation. The study received ethics approval from the University Hospital of Ghent Ethics Committee.

In total twenty-three youngsters participated. Two girls and 8 boys took part in the first grade group (mean age=12.6 y; SD=0.69). In the second grade group, 5 girls and 2 boys participated (mean age=14.0 y; SD=0.82); in the third group 4 girls and 2 boys participated (mean age=15.2 y; SD=0.98). Overall, 12 children were enrolled in general education, 11 received technical or vocational training. The focus groups took place during school hours and lasted between 50 and 60 minutes. All group conversations were audiotaped and transcribed.

1.2. Measures

The interview guide is inspired by social cognitive theory and the Reasoned Action Approach [12]. Participants were asked to only talk about experiences as bystanders or to imagine they were a bystander in a cyberbullying incident. The interview guide was pilot tested in a group of first-graders, to test for relevance and comprehensability. Minor modifications were made, to include more examples and prompting.

1.3. Analysis

Full results will later be analysed via Thematic Analysis using NVivo software. Presented here is the first step in this process, namely the detection of themes that will be used to design the codebook.
2. Results

2.1. Behaviour and behavioural intention

Quite unanimously adolescents would choose to defend the victim, but only when certain conditions are fulfilled. These conditions are summarized in Table 1.

Bullying is considered unfair when the bully picks on characteristics that are out of the victim’s control (e.g. appearance, handicap), when the victim’s family is dragged into it or when group norms are attacked (e.g. racist remarks). Exceptions to this are the loners: they behave strangely and are considered to be blamed for their own behaviour, which makes bullying seem fairer. This quote illustrates the differentiated behaviour:

“When you’re a foreigner or you’re not pretty or something, and you are bullied, you can’t do anything about that. But if you are not clean or act stupid towards other people, well, then it’s your own fault”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VICTIM</th>
<th>BULLY</th>
<th>CIRCUMSTANCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>Not popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>Always defend, regardless of the bully, regardless of circumstances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a friend</td>
<td>Learn more about the circumstances; support the bully; risk that friends will not back up the bully</td>
<td>Do nothing (passive bystanding or ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A loner</td>
<td>Never defend, do nothing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular</td>
<td>Defend, there is a high chance they are not the only defender in this case</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Defending can take several forms: talking to the bully (offline), giving the victim advice, comforting the victim, sticking around the victim at the playground, telling friends, telling the victim he or she can join their group, using humour, frightening the bully or physically retaliate. Behavioural options they would consider less are reacting online as this would publicly humiliate the bully and potentially make things worse; installing more internet safety for themselves as they would like to keep an eye on what goes on; and talking to teachers or parents, which takes too long, exposes them as a squealer, is not effective and because “we are not in grammar school and need to stand up for ourselves”. Interestingly, reinforcing is not considered contradictory to defending by the participants. They would contribute to the bullying online by laughing or liking the bully-message, while also providing comfort to the victim offline.

2.2. Behavioural determinants

Knowledge

All participants seemed knowledgeable on what cyber-bullying is. They differentiated between teasing and bullying, with teasing being something that happens among friends, that is not meant to hurt or is considered funny by the ‘victim’. Knowledge on consequences of cyberbullying for the victim was very limited and mostly negative consequences of physical bullying were discussed.
Attitudes
Cyberbullies are considered “losers who don’t have a real life” or “cowards who don’t dare to say it to my face”. Peers who reinforce the bullying are considered hypocrites, fake, stupid, people who want to fit in or who think it is funny. Those who defend are considered “popular” or “strong”. Passive bystanding is rather acceptable, some would not mind if their friends stood by and did nothing.

Subjective norm
Most participants said they thought their teachers expected the youngsters to tell them about the cyberbullying. Perceived expectations from parents were more diverse: some mentioned their parents expected them to stay out of it to avoid personal risk. Others said their parents would expect them to be able to handle it themselves, without involving an adult, and to defend their peers. They thought their peers expected them to support and comfort their friends, rather than defend them since everyone understands defending is difficult. Only one participant considered it his responsibility to also defend the weak. Being perceived as popular is an important facilitator in defending, in order not to get bullied himself.

Self-efficacy
The youngsters mentioned many different options to react as a bystander, but remained vague in the practical execution of their suggested coping strategies. Self-efficacy also differed by bystander response. Self-efficacy was high for giving the victim advice or consolation, but low for facing a bully alone in real-life (among girls) and for telling their parents. They felt that telling their parents “is weird, he [the victim] should tell his own parents” or thought parents would say “well, that is your problem to deal with”.

Outcome Expectations and Expectancies
Most participants thought there was some risk of also getting bullied if they stood up for the victim. However, this risk did not seem to deter them in their defending if the victim is a friend. Several strategies were mentioned to lower the risk of being bullied as a defender: not embarrass the bully, address the bully offline, when he is alone, take friends along.

Outcome expectations for telling teachers were rather negative: it takes too long, teachers do not respect the bystander’s wish to remain anonymous, and there is a risk that the teacher blames those who report the bullying.

Cues to action
Certain instances of cyberbullying were considered more severe and would encourage bystanders to take action by telling an adult: when the bullying occurred repeatedly, or when the bullying involved physical threats that should be taken seriously.

3. Discussion
This study explored determinants of bystander behaviour in cyberbullying, to provide insights for interventions. The first results confirm a connection between offline and online bullying: it often starts offline, continues online, but is preferably solved again offline. Similar factors play a role in cyberbullying bystander behaviour as in traditional bullying [13, 14]: social status and popularity increases defending behaviour,
moral disengagement decreases defending behaviour and defending is higher for in-group members than for others.

The repeated nature of cyberbullying appears to be important in the perception of youngsters, contrary to what previous studies on cyberbullying definitions found [1, 2]. Particular themes that emerged as individual behavioural determinants for defending a victim of cyberbullying were high self-efficacy for talking to the bully, but possibly limited knowledge on how to do this in an effective way. Self-efficacy for talking to parents and teachers was low. Knowledge on mental health problems caused by cyberbullying was lacking and increasing this may encourage adolescents to also defend for non-physical bullying types. The youngsters recognized the potential risk of defending the victim, but might consider the risk of being isolated when not defending a friend, and thereby making themselves a potential bully victim, as more threatening. Of all forms of defending, comforting is the most expected and considered easiest. Since comforting the victim has shown to be a buffer against the negative effects of victimization, this should be promoted as a first stepping stone. These preliminary results suggest that peer support interventions [15], coupled with environmental interventions with teachers and parents, can also hold promise for cyberbullying. This will need to be confirmed by in-depth analyses and further quantitative research.

References