

New study explores bystander intervention in cyberbullying

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Cyberbullying is drawing increasing attention, with online activity soaring and a larger number of bullying cases resulting in tragedy. "Bystander Intervention in Cyberbullying," a new study published in the National Communication Association's Communication Monographs reveals specific online conditions under which witnesses to cyberbullying are likely (or unlikely) to intervene in defense of a victim.

The study sheds light on the behavior of "bystanders" who "witness" [cyberbullying](#) episodes. Authors Nicholas Brody of the University of Puget Sound and Anita L. Vangelisti of the University of Texas at Austin confirmed several tendencies also associated with face-to-face bullying, and also highlighted the greater role of anonymity in digital communication, which can make intervention during bullying episodes less likely.

The researchers used a two-pronged approach in this study of undergraduate students. Students in one group were asked to recall a Facebook cyberbullying incident in the last six months in which they knew the victim; they were also asked to narrate several elements of the episode, including their own reaction to it, and their past personal experience of bullying. Students in a second group were placed into a hypothetical cyberbullying situation in which they witnessed embarrassing pictures being posted to a friend's Facebook page without the friend's consent. Participants were asked to report the manner in which they would intervene and, when presented with varying options, under what conditions and to what extent they would defend the victim.

Study results supported the "diffusion of responsibility effect." The higher the number of "bystanders," the less likely intervention would occur during a cyberbullying incident. Moreover, the perceived anonymity of "bystanders" also reduced the likelihood of intervention. However, the closeness that a particular "bystander" felt toward the victim was most consistently related to his or her decision to intervene. The perceived "invisibility" offered by [digital communication](#) is a significant concern. According to the authors, the feeling of invisibility among online witnesses "allows for less adherence to societal standards," and may result in antisocial behavior.

Because many college students report being bullied in an online environment, the need for greater awareness of this issue is crucial. The findings of this study might be used to educate schools, colleges, and even parents about the nature of interventions and how they can be cultivated to disrupt episodes of cyberbullying. Such steps could have an impact on reducing the practice, or at least the impact, of cyberbullying.

More information: "Bystander Intervention in Cyberbullying",
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