The Impact of Peer Relationships, Conformity, and Cognitive Empathy of Bystander Behavioral Intentions for Cyberbullying

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The purpose of this study was to investigate bystander behavioral intentions when adolescents witnessed cyberbullying. Self-reported data were collected from 884 junior high school students in Taiwan. The results indicated that adolescents who had negative peer relationship, higher conformity and lower levels of cognitive empathy were more likely to join in cyberbullying as perpetrators. Adolescents who had negative peer relationships, higher conformity, and lower levels of cognitive empathy were more likely to be a facilitator to reinforce or assist the cyberbullies. With positive peer relationships, lower conformity, and higher levels of cognitive empathy, adolescents were more likely to be a defender to help the victims. Outsiders were related to positive peer relationship and lower levels of cognitive empathy. In addition, girls who had higher conformity than boys would be less likely to help the victims. The implications of this research on cyberbullying are discussed.

Keywords: *peer relationships, bystander behavioral intentions, conformity, cognitive empathy, cyberbullying*

Summary

Cyberbullying is defined as harmful attacks on other people via the Internet. The definition of bullying has three criteria: intention to harm, repetitiveness, and a power imbalance in the interpersonal relationship. More and more people are suffering cyberbullying with the rapid development of the Internet, particularly adolescents. Kann et al. (2016) studied ninth to twelfth grade students in the United States and reported that 15.5% had been cyberbullied. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying occurs without time and space limitations (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Moreover, it is sometimes difficult for victims to identify their cyberbullies because of the anonymous nature of the Internet (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013). While most research on cyberbullying primarily focuses on the roles of perpetrators and victims, studying bystanders who play crucial roles in stopping cyberbullying may be another approach (Bastiaensens et al., 2014). Therefore, this study focused on adolescent bystanders who witnessed cyberbullying.

The roles of bystanders were distinguished into four main types: reinforcers, assistants, defenders, and outsiders (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Research on bullying and cyberbullying has shown that bystanders often remain passive (Oh & Hazler, 2009; Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Few studies have concentrated on bystanders' behavioral intentions. The important factors in bystander behavioral intentions are as follows.

Regarding demographic factors, gender is a significant predictor of bystander behavioral intentions. Some studies have shown that girls defend victims and provide them more support than boys (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013, 2016; Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2016; Van Cleemput et al., 2014), and boys are more likely to join in cyberbullying and engage in passive behaviors (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Macháčková et al., 2016). However, Barlińska, Szuster, and Winiewski (2013) found no gender differences in negative bystander behavior.

Peer relationships have often been viewed as an important factor that influences bystander behavioral intentions. Many studies have used different terms to express peer relationships, such as "peer acceptance or rejection," "social preference," and "popularity." Those who are rejected by their peers may engage in delinquency and do not help their peers who are rejected more strongly than themselves (Bierman, Kalvin, & Heinrichs, 2015; van Rijsewijk, Dijkstra, Pattiselanno, Steglich, & Veenstra, 2016). Thus, the present study investigated whether peer relationships are related to bystander behavioral intentions.

Another important factor is conformity. Conformity is a type of social influence that impels individuals to change their beliefs or behaviors to fit in with a group (Allen, 1965). Hinduja and Patchin (2013) argued that middle and high school students would report their cyberbullying behaviors if most of their friends were involved. Despite the fact that bystander behavioral intentions may be influenced by peers, bystanders may also witness cyberbullying of complete strangers. Thus, the present study extensively explored the relation between conformity and bystanders' behavioral intentions on cyberbullying.

The last important factor is cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy is a perspective-taking skill that helps people understand others' emotions (Davis, 1980; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004). Some studies have indicated that higher levels of cognitive empathy tend to inhibit passive bystander behavior toward cyberbullying (Barlińska et al., 2013; Del Rey et al., 2016). However, others have found that cognitive empathy is unlikely to be associated with cyberbullying (Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016). Therefore, we would like to explore the effect of cognitive empathy on bystanders' behavioral intentions.

In sum, the purpose of this study was to explore the effects of gender, peer relationships, conformity, and cognitive empathy on bystanders' behavioral intentions.

Materials and Method

The present study surveyed 884 junior high school students in Taiwan. A stratified purposive cluster sample of seventh to ninth grade students from 12 schools was selected. The instrument consists of five main parts. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure positive/negative peer relationships, conformity, cognitive empathy, and bystanders' behavioral intentions. The Chinese version of the Taiwan Relationships Inventory for Children and Adolescents was used to measure positive peer relationships (Wu, Wu, Hsu, & Shiau, 2008). We used the Loneliness and Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984) to measure negative peer relationships. The conformity scale was revised from Bearden and Rose's (1990) Attention to Social Comparison Information. Davis' (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index was used to measure cognitive empathy. The bystander behavioral intentions questionnaire included the facilitator, defender, and outsider scales. To find significant differences among the variables, partial least squares structural equation modeling and multiple group analysis were performed.

Results and Discussion

Regarding involvement in cyberbullying, 6.7% of the respondents had bullied someone and 9.3% had been bullied at least once in the past three months. Approximately 29% of the participants had witnessed cyberbullying on social networking sites during the same period.

Multi-group analysis showed that girls with higher conformity levels were less likely to be defenders than boys. This result did not support the findings of previous research on gender. Girls and boys were probably influenced by different types of conformity. The impact of conformity on gender clearly needs further exploration.

Positive peer relationships were significantly associated with defenders and outsiders, which corresponded with previous research (Closson & Hymel, 2016; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). However, we found no link between positive peer relationships and facilitators. The study may have had a measurement problem. The measurement items for positive peer relationships included "good interaction" and "good acceptance." Well-accepted adolescents

have reported more prosocial behavior than rejected ones (Closson & Hymel, 2016; Wentzel & McNamara, 1999). Wright (2014) found that low social preference is connected to higher aggressive behavior, but popular adolescents are more likely to engage in cyberbullying. Therefore, the measurement of positive peer relationships in the study created a mixed effect between positive interaction with peers and good acceptance by peers.

Negative peer relationships were related to facilitators, but not statistically significantly related to outsiders. Interestingly, negative peer relationships and defenders were positively correlated. This result did not support previous research findings on negative peer relationships. One possible reason for this is that these adolescents provided support to improve their interpersonal relationships on the Internet. The important issue for future research is to compare the differences between interpersonal relationships offline and on the Internet.

The results also showed that higher levels of conformity were significantly positively related to facilitators, negatively related to defenders, and not associated with outsiders. Nevertheless, the generalizability of these results to other populations with different cultures may be limited. Bond and Smith (1996) conducted 133 studies of meta-analysis, which indicated that collectivist countries tend to show higher levels of conformity than individualist cultures. Future studies could investigate this important concern in diverse cultures.

Cognitive empathy was positively connected to defenders and negatively connected to both facilitators and outsiders. These results were consistent with those of Del Rey et al. (2016). If cognitive empathy was evoked in bystanders, they could understand victims' feelings, and would then probably provide support to victims.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study found that the development of cyberbullying and bystander behavioral intentions were influenced by positive peer relationships, negative peer relationships, conformity, and cognitive empathy. These results provide educators with a better understanding of how to increase students' helping behaviors and reduce passive behaviors around cyberbullying.