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Moral (Dis)engagement among Higher Education Student-Bystanders in Cyberbullying

Prejeto 15. 2. 2023 / Sprejeto 15. 5. 2023

Znanstveni članek

UDK 364.636:004.738.5

KLJUČNE BESEDE: moralna (ne)zavzetost, spletno nasilje, opazovalci, intervencijski model, študenti

POVZETEK – V študiji smo žeeli ugotoviti, kako različne demografske spremenljivke (spol, starost, preživljanje prostega časa na spletu) in mehanizmi moralne (ne)zavzetosti (moralno upravičevanje, minimalizacija škodljivih učinkov, zanikanje ali razpršitev odgovornosti, razčlovečenje) napovedujejo zaznavanje spletnega nasilja pri študentih opazovalcih v skladu z intervencijskim modelom, ki predvideva, da mora opazovalec opraviti pet korakov, da posreduje pri nasilju: opazi dogodek, dogodek si razlaga kot tako resen, da nujno zahteva pomoč, sprejme odgovornost za posredovanje, ve, kako posredovati ali priskrbeti pomoč, in posreduje (Latané in Darley, 1970). Vzorec je vključeval 205 študentov opazovalcev. S pomočjo multiplih linearnih regresijskih modelov smo največ variance (27%) lahko pojasnili pri drugem koraku intervencijskega modela – tj. pri razlagi dogodka kot nujnega in potrebi po nudjenju pomoči. Starejši študenti in študenti z manj izraženo dehumanizacijo so pogosteje dojemali spletno nasilje kot bolj resno in bili bolj pripravljeni pomagati. Naše ugotovitve kažejo na potrebo po večjem interesu za raziskovanje vedenja opazovalcev in oblikovanje intervencij pri spletinem nasilju tudi pri študentih.

Retrieved 15. 2. 2023 / Accepted 15. 5. 2023

Scientific paper

UDC 364.636:004.738.5

KEYWORDS: moral (dis)engagement, cyberbullying, bystanders, intervention model, higher education students

ABSTRACT – In our study, we aimed to determine how different demographic variables (gender, age, free time spent online) and mechanisms of moral (dis)engagement (justification, disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences, diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization) predict perceptions of cyberbullying among student bystanders, according to the Bystander Intervention Model. The model proposes that a bystander must take five steps in order to intervene: notice the event, interpret the event as an emergency requiring help, accept responsibility for intervening, know how to intervene or provide help, and implement decisions to intervene (Latané and Darley, 1970). Our sample included 205 student-bystanders in cyberbullying. The most variance (27%) was explained in the second step – to interpret the event as an emergency and help. Older students and students with less pronounced dehumanization were more likely to perceive cyberbullying as serious and to help. Our findings suggest a need for greater interest and intervention in the group of cyber-bystanders among this age group of students as well.

1 Introduction

In recent years, the expansive use of electronic devices in the daily lives of higher education students has prompted researchers to look at the darker side of ICT communication – cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is defined as an aggressive act carried out repeatedly by an individual or group of individuals through an electronic medium (Kowalski et al., 2014). Most studies (e.g., Cappadocia et al., 2013; DeSmet et al., 2016) focused on adolescents, leaving out another important group – higher education students. The reason may be that students at this age are perceived as adults capable of taking care of themselves,

that the influences of the school and home environments are less important, and that “nothing can be done” (Myers and Cowie, 2019). However, as research on the health consequences of cyberbullying and its impact on psychosocial well-being demonstrates (Erişti and Akbulut, 2019; Peled, 2019), there is a need to systematically address these issues and identify the risk and protective factors also in this age group. Especially as the negative consequences (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance abuse, poorer academic performance, suicidality) of cyberbullying in children and adolescents are already well documented (Patchin and Hinduja, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2014).

Most studies among adolescents and higher education students have focused more on the roles of victims and perpetrators (Dou et al., 2020; Tanrikulu and Erdur-Baker, 2021) rather than cyberbullying-bystanders, although bystanders are the largest group and consequently, in a social sense, the group with the greatest social power to stop this bullying (Pečjak and Pirc, 2014, p. 163).

In recent years, researchers have focused on the mechanisms of moral disengagement (MD) in the context of cyberbullying (Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). Given that some authors suggest that targeting cyber-bystanders in cyberbullying prevention efforts can reduce incidents and mitigate harm (e.g., DeSmet et al., 2016; Moxey and Bussey, 2020), our goal was to identify factors that could be acted upon in cyberbullying prevention efforts. We derived from socio-cognitive theory, which considers the interaction between environmental, personal, and behavioural factors. We focused on research that examines MD as an individual factor and the Bystander Intervention Model as a contextual factor (Machackova, 2020).

MD refers to a set of socio-cognitive mechanisms that enable individuals to “turn off” self-sanctions in the form of feelings of shame, guilt, or negative self-esteem that, in principle, occur when they violate their own moral standards (Bandura, 1999). According to Bandura (2002), the most common mechanisms are moral justification, diffusion or displacement of responsibility, disregarding or minimizing the injurious effects of perpetrators, and blaming and dehumanizing victims.

There is ample evidence that MD is one of the most important individual factors explaining involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Gini et al., 2014; Lo Cricchio et al., 2021). However, Lo Cricchio et al. (2021) caution that these associations are still unclear as the findings are inconclusive. This is particularly true for MD in bystander behaviour. Some studies found no associations between cyber-defending and MD (Allison and Bussey, 2016; DeSmet et al., 2016); others found that mechanisms of MD reduce the willingness to intervene in cyberbullying (DeSmet et al., 2014; Moxey and Bussey, 2020).

Latané and Darley’s (1970) Bystander Intervention Model (BIM) has already been operationalized for traditional bullying intervention by Nickerson et al. (2014). Machackova (2020) notes that it is also applicable to cyberbullying incidents as a contextual factor. It refers to five steps that a bystander must take in order to intervene:

- notice the event,
- interpret the event as an emergency requiring help,
- accept responsibility for intervening,
- know how to intervene or provide help, and
- implement decisions to intervene (Latané and Darley, 1970).

In relation to the first step of the model, Heirman and Walrave (2008) noted that cyber-bystanders are unable to see the emotional reactions of victims and therefore often underestimate the severity of the event, which can lead them to remain passive and not take further steps. For the second step, some authors found that the most important predictor of cyber-bystanding were more or less positive attitudes towards cyber-bullying (DeSmet et al., 2016) and that cyber-bystanders are more motivated to help if they interpret a cyberbullying event to be very serious (DeSmet et al., 2014). The third step – taking responsibility for intervening – is often diffused in cyberbullying among many cyber-bystanders in an online context (Leung, 2021). The fourth step is knowing how to intervene and Leung (2021) warns that cyber-bystanders may not have enough ICT knowledge to respond appropriately. Only knowledge of effective strategies motivates cyber-bystanders to act (DeSmet et al., 2014; 2016).

Research on bystanders in general, both in traditional bullying and cyberbullying, has shown conflicting results with respect to gender. Some studies found no differences between female and male participants in providing help against traditional bullying and cyberbullying (Barlińska et al., 2013; Machackova et al., 2013); others found that female cyber-bystanders were more likely to defend cyber-victims (DeSmet et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Pečjak and Pirc, 2014, p. 164).

In terms of participant age, some studies on adolescents found that younger students were more likely to intervene than older ones (Ma et al., 2019; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). According to Moxey and Bussey (2020), these contradictory findings may be due to the anonymity of the online environment, which may lead to less pressure to act in a gender- and age-specific manner. We found no studies which would explore the relationship between cyber-bystanders' age and their reactions to cyberbullying events among higher education students.

The relationship between time spent online and involvement in cyberbullying is clearer also among higher education students and younger adults. Findings from multiple studies indicate that more time spent online predicts involvement in cyberbullying (Adebayo et al., 2019; Balakrishnan, 2015). Costello et al. (2017) found that, for cyber-bystanders in particular, time spent online predicted their more frequent intervention in cyberbullying events.

In a meta-analysis by Killer et al. (2019), only two studies of MD and cyber-bystanders among children and adolescents and none among higher education students were included. Therefore, we were interested in examining the relationship between MD among higher education student-cyber-bystanders and their perceptions of the steps of the BIM. Moreover, there is a need to clarify the role of age and gender with respect to the relationship between MD and cyberbullying, since Lo Cricchio et al. (2021) did not find a clear pattern of associations between these variables. In line with the results of the studies presented in the introduction, our research questions were:

- How do demographic variables (gender, age, time spent online) and mechanisms of MD predict each step of the BIM?
- What are the key MD mechanisms that might prevent a cyber-bystander from taking further steps that lead to their reaction?

2 Method

Participants

Our total sample comprised 764 students, but the current study was conducted on a sample of 205 students (71.7% female, 27.8% male, 0.5% undefined) who were identified as cyber-bystanders. The mean age of students was 21.25 years ($SD = 2.96$).

Instruments

We created an online survey. First, we designed a questionnaire to find out what role students predominantly play in cyberbullying. We followed the form proposed by Cheng et al. (2011) and prepared three versions of the same items. The first referred to cyber-perpetrators (e.g., *In the last six months, I have sent someone an angry, abusive, or vulgar message using a computer or smartphone*), the second to cyber-victims (e.g., *In the past six months, someone threatened and intimidated me on my computer or smartphone*), and the third to cyber-bystanders (e.g., *In the past six months, I saw or learned that someone sent a violent or horrific photo or video to someone using a computer or smartphone*). Participants responded on a 6-point scale: 1 – never; 2 – once; 3 – two or three times; 4 – once or twice a month; 5 – once a week; 6 – more than once a week. A participant was assigned a role if they responded “once or twice a month” to one or more items. The higher the sum of the points within the scale, the more pronounced was the representative of a particular role. The alpha reliability coefficient for the perpetrator scale was 0.81, for the victim scale 0.80, and for the bystander scale 0.90.

The Bystander Intervention Model in Cyberbullying Questionnaire (BIMCQ – Bystander Intervention in Bullying and Sexual Harassment, Nickerson et al., 2014; Slovenian adaptation by Kos, 2021) asks students about their attitudes towards cyberbullying (sensitivity, responsibility and help for the victim) on a 5-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree). The original questionnaire includes 16 items with 5 steps (*Notice the event; Interpret the event as an emergency; Accept responsibility to help; Know how to help; Implement an intervention decision*). On a Slovenian sample of late adolescents, Kos (2021) found four factors (explaining 67.1% of the variance): *Notice the event* ($\alpha = 0.74$), *Know how to help* ($\alpha = 0.79$), *Interpret the event as an emergency and help* ($\alpha = 0.86$), and *Accept responsibility and help* ($\alpha = 0.82$). The confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for our sample had an acceptable model fit ($CFI = 0.93$, $RMSEA = 0.07$, $SRMR = 0.06$; Browne and Cudeck, 1993). Internal consistency coefficients were 0.68 for *Notice the event*, 0.80 for *Know how to help*, 0.76 for *Interpret the event as an emergency and help* and 0.84 for *Accept responsibility and help*.

The Moral Disengagement in Cyberbullying Questionnaire (MDCQ) was developed by Kos (2021), based on the Moral Disengagement in Cyberbullying Questionnaire – CBMDQ-15 (Day and Lazarus, 2016) and measures participants' justifications for cyberbullying. The questionnaire consists of 12 items with four factors. CFA was performed in our sample. The fit indices ($CFI = 0.96$, $RMSEA = 0.06$, $SRMR = 0.04$) indicated a moderate model fit. Internal consistency coefficients were low for *Moral justification* (0.49) and *Diffusion of responsibility* (0.59), good for *Dehumanization* (0.76) and excellent for *Disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences* (0.85).

Students were also asked to indicate how much of their free time they usually spend online: 1 – none, 2 – up to half an hour, 3 – from half an hour to 1 hour, 4 – 1 to 2 h, 5 – 2 to 4 h, 6 – 4 to 6 h and 7 – 6 or more hours.

Procedure and data analysis

We asked psychology students to send links to the online survey to their friends and acquaintances who attend college, higher education programmes, or universities. Students gave their informed consent to participate in our study. On the last page of the survey, students were given information about call centres and websites about (cyber) bullying. Data were collected in March and April 2021. Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted using the R lavaan package v0.8. Pearson correlations between dependent and independent variables and multiple linear regression (MLR) analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 25.0.

3 Results

First, we present the descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between the studied variables (Table 1).

Table 1

Means, SDs and Pearson correlations between dependent and independent variables

	BIM 1	BIM 2	BIM 3	BIM 4	MD 5	MD 6	MD 7	MD 8
BIM-Na	–	0.20*	0.16*	0.09	-0.06	-0.09	-0.06	-0.23*
BIM-Eb		–	0.43*	-0.10	-0.33*	-0.34*	-0.30*	-0.34*
BIM-Rc			–	0.40*	-0.24*	-0.31*	-0.15*	-0.26*
BIM-Kd				–	0.08	0.05	0.08	0.21*
MD-Juse					–	0.31*	0.51*	0.38*
MD-Disf						–	0.32*	0.57*
MD-Difg							–	0.44*
MD-Dehh								–
M	3.77	4.36	3.33	2.84	1.87	2.14	1.92	2.20
SD	0.73	0.55	0.66	0.78	0.67	1.06	0.64	0.84

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, BIM-N Bystander Intervention Model – Notice the event, BIM-E – Interpret the event as an emergency and help, BIM-R – Accept responsibility and help, BIM-K – Know how to help, MD-Jus Moral disengagement – Justification, MD-Dis – Disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences, MD-Dif – Diffusion of responsibility, MD-Deh – Dehumanization

The intercorrelation matrix shows that the correlations between the factors of MD are slightly stronger than the correlations between the factors of BIM. The correlations

between BIM and MD are either negligible or low to moderate, the strongest being negative associations between interpreting the event as an emergency (seriousness) and all MD factors. The mean scores for the BIM factors indicate that students generally notice cyberbullying events, take them seriously, and feel somewhat responsible to take some form of action. However, it is evident that the mean score for knowledge is the lowest. The average scores for the MD factors are relatively low, with the highest SD for disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences.

Next, we were interested in how students' gender, age, free time spent online, and moral disengagement mechanisms predicted different factors in BIM. We used multiple linear regression analysis (Table 2). In the proposed models, gender, age, and free time spent online were included in the first step, and MD factors in the second step.

Table 2

Regression coefficients for steps of the Bystander Intervention Model

		Model 1 Notice the event			Model 2 Interpret the event as an emergency and help			Model 3 Accept responsibility and help			Model 4 Know how to help		
		B	β	p	B	β	p	B	β	p	B	β	p
Step 1	Gender	0.04	0.03	0.703	-0.32	-0.27	0.000**	-0.16	-0.12	0.100	0.21	0.13	0.075
	Age	0.03	0.14	0.043*	-0.02	-0.09	0.202	0.04	0.17	0.015*	0.03	0.13	0.064
	Free time online	0.14	0.21	0.003*	0.09	0.17	0.012*	-0.00	-0.00	0.954	-0.07	-0.11	0.137
		R = 0.25 $R^2 = 0.06$ $\Delta R = 0.06^*$			R = 0.32 $R^2 = 0.10$ $\Delta R = 0.10**$			R = 0.22 $R^2 = 0.05$ $\Delta R = 0.05^*$			R = 0.20 $R^2 = 0.04$ $\Delta R = 0.04^*$		
Step 2	Gender	0.16	0.10	0.168	-0.20	-0.17	0.012*	-0.04	-0.03	0.679	0.12	0.07	0.335
	Age	0.03	0.12	0.085	-0.02	-0.12	0.052	0.03	0.15	0.026*	0.04	0.15	0.032*
	Free time online	0.14	0.21	0.004*	0.10	0.19	0.003*	0.01	0.02	0.762	-0.07	-0.09	0.192
	MD-Jus	-0.03	-0.03	0.714	-0.14	-0.18	0.021*	-0.17	-0.17	0.034*	0.01	0.01	0.895
	MD-Dis	0.02	0.03	0.747	-0.09	-0.18	0.020*	-0.13	-0.22	0.010*	-0.07	-0.10	0.260
	MD-Dif	0.08	0.07	0.378	-0.10	-0.11	0.152	0.05	0.05	0.558	-0.01	-0.01	0.930
	MD-Deh	-0.24	-0.28	0.003*	-0.06	-0.09	0.281	-0.05	-0.06	0.505	0.25	0.27	0.005*
		R = 0.35 $R^2 = 0.12$ $\Delta R = 0.06^*$			R = 0.52 $R^2 = 0.27$ $\Delta R = 0.17**$			R = 0.39 $R^2 = 0.15$ $\Delta R = 0.10**$			R = 0.30 $R^2 = 0.09$ $\Delta R = 0.05^*$		

Note. N = 195 bystanders; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, β – standardized β coefficient; R – multiple correlation coefficient, R^2 – determinant coefficient; ΔR^2 – multiple correlation coefficient change

With the variables in the regression models, we managed to explain the most variance in *Interpret the event as an emergency and help* (27%) and in *Accept responsibility and help* (15%), but less in *Notice the event* (12%), and the least in *Know how to help* (9%).

Among the sociodemographic factors, the following proved to be important predictors of BIM steps: free time spent online (by noticing the event and by interpreting the event as serious) and age (by accepting responsibility and by knowing how to help).

For MD, the following predictors were important: dehumanization (by noticing the event and by knowing how to help) and justification and disregarding of consequences (by interpreting the event as an emergency and by accepting responsibility and helping).

4 Discussion

The aim of our study was to provide some new insights into the issue of cyberbullying among higher education students. We examined how different sociodemographic variables and mechanisms of MD predict the cyber-bystanders' perceptions of each step of the BIM.

Authors have highlighted the importance of (cyber) bystanders in (cyber) bullying dynamics (Saarento et al., 2015; Moxey and Bussey, 2020), as they are the most powerful group with the potential to exacerbate or ameliorate a (cyber) bullying event, similar to traditional peer bullying (Pečjak and Pirc, 2014, p. 163). Therefore, the following analyses were conducted on our subsample of higher education cyber-bystanders. Using a series of multiple linear regressions (MLR), we created predictive models for the perceptions of the different steps of the BIM.

In the first step of the BIM – “Notice the event”, we were able to explain 12% of the differences between students with the variables included. The first step of the MLR showed that older students and those who spent more free time online were significantly more likely to notice a cyberbullying event. Only free time spent online remained a significant predictor of noticing the cyberbullying event in the second step of MLR, which is not surprising given that the likelihood of witnessing such an event increases with time spent in cyberspace (Adebayo et al., 2019; Balakrishnan, 2015; Costello et al., 2017). Another important predictor was the MD mechanism of dehumanization. Namely, students who believed that turning off the social network was not a solution to stopping cyberbullying events, or those who were less likely to believe that some students may not be affected by cyberbullying because they are not as emotional, were more likely to acknowledge that cyberbullying exists among students.

In the second step of the BIM – “Interpret the event as an emergency and help”, we were able to explain 27% of the variance for this factor. Female students and students who spent more free time online were more likely to interpret a cyberbullying event as an emergency and provide help. Both predictors remained significant also in the second step of the MLR. In terms of gender, our results are consistent with other studies (DeSmet et al., 2016; Ma et al., 2019; Macaulay et al., 2019; Pečjak and Pirc, 2014, p. 164) – females are more prosocially oriented and convinced that they need to help peers in trouble. The results also support previous findings by Costello et al. (2017),

who found that higher presence in cyberspace predicted cyber-bystanders' intervention in cyberbullying incidents. Furthermore, students with less pronounced moral justification and disregard for or misrepresentation of injurious consequences tended to perceive a cyberbullying situation as serious and (intended to) help. Students who believed that cyberbullying does no real harm and those who were less likely to believe that cyberbullying is a form of retaliation were more likely to believe that cyberbullying is hurtful and could affect cyber-victims, even if a cyberbullying event is meant as a joke. They were also more likely to think that they would do something to stop cyberbullying if they noticed it. It seems that (especially female) students, who are more sensitive to the feelings of cyber-victims, see a cyberbullying event as something worth addressing and taking action against. In terms of prevention, it would therefore be beneficial to train emotion regulation in younger students as well, as it shows an improvement in their social ability and sensitivity (Romih and Košir, 2018, p. 36).

In the third step of the BIM, we predicted "acceptance of responsibility and help" in the case of cyberbullying. The included variables explained 15% of the variance among students. It turned out that older students perceived greater responsibility and were more willing to help. Age was a significant predictor in both the first and second step of the model. The result was expected, since students were already at a high level of moral development, with simultaneously developed critical thinking skills (Mason and Gibbs, 1993), which could cause students to feel a duty to help. Regarding the MD mechanism, we found that less moral justification and disregard for consequences predicted a greater likelihood that a student would feel personally responsible when witnessing cyberbullying.

The last step of the BIM was "Know how to help". With the variables included in the model, we were able to explain 9% of the differences between students in this factor. Two significant predictors were found – age and dehumanization. The results showed that older students have more knowledge about what to say or do to help someone who has been a victim of cyberbullying. This has to do with more experience, as they have probably already tried different strategies and found out which ones are more effective. However, the fact that dehumanization was a positive predictor was somewhat puzzling. One possible explanation would be that students believe that they know what to do, but their knowledge of strategies is based on their misconceptions about cyberbullying (e.g., that cyberbullying can be avoided by turning off the Internet, or that if the victim of cyberbullying is supposedly indifferent to what is happening to them, this means that they do not need help). Therefore, we assume that students are not sufficiently equipped with the appropriate procedures for taking action when they witness cyberbullying situations, which is also in line with the lowest mean score for "Know how to help" (Table 1). This is consistent with the results of a qualitative study by Crosslin and Golman (2014), who found that students do not know where to report cyberbullying.

Although we did not find any prevention programmes specific to college students on strategies for dealing with cyberbullying situations, we believe that some programmes could benefit higher education students as well. One way is to report cyberbullying in the online application where it occurs. Another is to offer support to the victim by talking to them in a private chat and suggesting they seek help, or by posting positive comments in response to negative ones. It is also important that students realize how

harmful it can be if they themselves engage in online bullying with offensive comments (Safe.si, 2021).

Practical implications

Our findings suggest that cyber-bystanders are indeed an important group that should be educated about strategies they can use when they witness a cyberbullying event. Moreover, uninvolved students and those who were identified as cyber-bystanders should be sensitized about the seriousness of cyberbullying events (even those meant as jokes) and of their important role in preventing cyberbullying events by taking responsibility and responding. Knauf et al. (2018) and Lo Cricchio et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of addressing the beliefs that promote the mechanisms of moral disengagement (e.g., justifying or trivializing cyberbullying incidents) and promoting moral responsibility in an online interaction. Therefore, it seems necessary to identify and address students' misconceptions about cyberbullying, as these could also be a barrier to students taking a more active role in preventing cyberbullying. Sabella et al. (2013) mention the misconception that cyberbullying can be stopped by disconnecting from the Internet or deleting offending messages, which is not enough and can lead to the destruction of evidence. Instead, they suggest providing students with information and skills they can use when confronted with cyberbullying. This could be done by organizing short, mandatory workshops that could include activities to increase awareness of cyberbullying incidents and a sense of responsibility for non-aggressive online communication (Crosslin and Golman, 2014; Knauf et al., 2018). Activities should also focus on fostering students' self-efficacy beliefs to help in cyberbullying situations (Ferreira et al., 2020), promoting empathy (Torgal et al., 2023) and highlighting the consequences that cyberbullying has on victims (Dominguez-Hernandez et al., 2018). Educational institutions can take preventive action against cyberbullying by teaching students the skills they need to resist bullying and by encouraging the development of emotional competencies that will help them avoid becoming victims or bullies (Jevtić and Petrović, 2016, p. 116). This is especially important because there is a positive interdependence between online and traditional bullying (Pšunder and Kozmus, 2020, p. 92). It would also be beneficial for college professors to set up an anonymous hotline for students to report cyberbullying incidents. In short, our findings call on stakeholders and researchers to turn their focus also to groups of cyber-bystanders and uninvolved students at post-secondary educational institutions.

Limitations and future directions

There are some limitations to our study. First, the prevalence rates could be influenced by the possibility that students who spend more of their free time on online interactions chose to participate in our online survey, thereby increasing our sample bias. There is also a need for caution when interpreting the results regarding moral justification since the internal consistency coefficient for this factor was very poor. In addition, we only captured students' perceptions at a declarative level. Namely, we sought to capture their beliefs about cyberbullying events to determine their MD mechanisms and their perceptions about the steps of BIM. However, the behavioural element was missing. Therefore, for future research, we propose that students describe their actual behaviour when they witness a cyberbullying incident. Another issue is that we treated

cyber-bystanders as a homogeneous group rather than differentiating them in terms of their aggressive/constructive behaviours (e.g., Bussey et al., 2020; Luo and Bussey, 2019) or their guilty/non-guilty feelings (Oberman, 2011). Future research, particularly studies examining MD mechanisms in cyber-bystanders, should take into account that cyber-bystanders have several other characteristics (aside from MD mechanisms) that may differentially predict their behaviour in cyber-bullying incidents (e.g., aggressiveness, empathy, prior victimization, etc.). Finally, it is important to emphasize that researchers need to reach a consensus on a time frame for reporting cyberbullying events that would allow for better comparability of results across different studies.

This study was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P5-0110).

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Moralna (ne)zavzetost pri študentih opazovalcih spletnega nasilja

Spletne nasilje je definirano kot agresivno dejanje, ki ga posameznik ali skupina posameznikov izvaja večkrat prek elektronskega medija (Kowalski idr., 2014). Pri tem se je večina dosedanjih študij (Cappadocia idr., 2013; DeSmet idr., 2016) osredotočala predvsem na otroke in mladostnike, ne pa na študentsko populacijo. Razlog je lahko v tem, da dojemamo študente kot odrasle, ki so sposobni poskrbeti sami zase in na katere ima okolje manjši vpliv, oz. menimo, da se pri njih "ne da nič več narediti" (Myers in Cowie, 2019). Vendar pa, kot kažejo sicer redke raziskave o posledicah spletnega nasilja na psihosocialno počutje študentov (Erişti in Akbulut, 2019; Peled, 2019), obstaja potreba po sistematični obravnavi teh vprašanj ter prepoznavanju rizičnih in varovalnih dejavnikov tudi pri tej starostni skupini. Večina študij med študenti se je do sedaj osredotočala na vlogi izvajalcev in tistih, ki nasilje doživljajo, tj. žrtve in storilce (Dou idr., 2020; Tanrikulu in Erdur-Baker, 2021), in ne na opazovalce spletnega nasilja, kot je to v primeru naše študije.

Eden od procesov, ki so pogosto predmet preučevanja pri (spletinem) medvrstniškem nasilju, je mehanizem moralne nezavzetosti (MNZ). Moralna nezavzetost vključuje vrsto socialno-kognitivnih mehanizmov, ki posameznikom omogočajo, da "izklopijo" samosankcioniranje v obliki občutkov sramu, krvide ali negativnega samovrednotenja. Načeloma se pojavijo, ko kršijo lastna moralna merila (Bandura, 1999). Po Banduri (2002) so najpogosteji mehanizmi MNZ: moralno opravičevanje, razpršitev ali prenos odgovornosti na druge, minimiziranje škodljivih učinkov storilcev ter obtoževanje in razčlovečenje žrtev. Pri tem raziskovalci poudarjajo, da je razvijanje moralne zavzetosti pri opazovalcih spletnega nasilja lahko pomemben zaščitni dejavnik, ki zmanjšuje pojavnost in posledice tega nasilja (DeSmet idr., 2016; Moxey in Bussey, 2020). Vendar pa dosedanje ugotovitve o povezavi med moralno nezavzetostjo in opazovalci spletnega nasilja niso konsistentne: v nekaterih niso odkrili povezav med moralno nezavzetostjo in branjenjem žrtev (Allison in Bussey, 2016; DeSmet idr., 2016), drugi pa so ugotovili, da mehanizmi moralne nezavzetosti zmanjšujejo pripravljenost za posredovanje (Moxey in Bussey, 2020).

Izhajajoč iz socialno-kognitivne teorije, ki poudarja interaktivno povezanost okoljskih, osebnih in vedenjskih dejavnikov, lahko pri spletnem nasilju moralno nezavzetost obravnavamo kot osebni dejavnik, kot pomemben okoljski dejavnik pa Machackova (2020) navaja intervencijski model opazovalcev.

Intervencijski model (Latané in Darley, 1970) opisuje pet korakov, ki jih mora opazovalec medvrstniškega nasilja narediti, preden ukrepa:

- opaziti dogodek,
- interpretirati dogodek kot resen in ogrožajoč,
- se čutiti odgovornega za posredovanje,
- vedeti, kako posredovati oz. pomagati, in
- odločiti se za posredovanje.

Raziskave o vedenju opazovalcev glede na intervencijski model so pri spletnem nasilju pokazale nasprotno: rezultate glede na spol. Nekatere študije niso odkrile razlik med spoloma pri napovedovanju pomoči (Barlińska idr., 2013; Machackova idr., 2013), druge pa so ugotovile večjo verjetnost, da bodo ženske opazovalke pogosteje branile spletnne žrtve (DeSmet idr., 2016; Ma idr., 2019). Kar zadeva starost opazovalcev, so nekatere študije pokazale, da je večja verjetnost, da bodo prej kot starejši posredovali mlajši mladostniki (Ma idr., 2019; Van Cleemput idr., 2014); nismo pa našli študij, ki bi raziskovale odzive na spletno nasilje pri študentih. Pri študentski populaciji pa obstajajo raziskave, ki kažejo, da več časa, preživetega na spletu, napoveduje večjo vpletjenost v spletno nasilje nasploh (Adebayo idr., 2019; Balakrishnan, 2015), pri študentih opazovalcih pa večjo verjetnost za posredovanje (Costello idr., 2017).

Zaradi pomanjkanja študij o MNZ pri študentih opazovalcih in njihovem odzivanju na spletno nasilje smo skušali v naši raziskavi odgovoriti na dve raziskovalni vprašanji:

- Kako demografske spremenljivke (spol, starost in čas, preživet na spletu) in moralna nezavzetost napovedujejo korake pri intervencijskem modelu?
- Kateri so ključni mehanizmi moralne nezavzetosti, ki bi opazovalcu spletnega nasilja lahko preprečili, da opravi korake v skladu z intervencijskim modelom?

V celotnem vzorcu 764 študentov je bilo 205 študentov opazovalcev spletnega nasilja, od tega 71,7% žensk, 27,8% moških in 0,5% neopredeljenih. Njihova povprečna starost je bila 21,25 leta ($SD = 2,96$).

Uporabili smo tri pripomočke. Prvi je bil spletni vprašalnik, ki smo ga oblikovali za potrebe študije. Z njim smo določili vloge pri spletnem nasilju: izvajalec nasilja, študent, ki nasilje doživlja, in opazovalec nasilja. Študenti so odgovarjali s pomočjo 6-stopenjske lestvice na vprašanje, kako pogosto so bili v zadnjih 6 mesecih v kateri od vlog (1 – nikoli; 6 – več kot enkrat na teden). Višji skupni seštevek je kazal bolj izrazito vlogo. Vse tri lestvice so imele ustrezne zanesljivosti (alfa za lestvico izvajalca je bil 0,81, za študenta, ki doživlja nasilje, 0,80 in za opazovalca 0,90). Študenti so odgovorili še na vprašanje, koliko prostega časa na dan preživijo na spletu (1 – nič, 7 – več kot 6 ur).

Drugi je bil Vprašalnik opazovalcev v intervencijskem modelu pri spletnem nasilju (Kos, 2021) s 16 postavkami, na katere so študenti odgovarjali s pomočjo 5-stopenjske lestvice (1 – sploh se ne strinjam, 5 – popolnoma se strinjam) in so vsebovale štiri faktorje: zaznava dogodka ($\alpha = 0,74$), razlaga dogodka kot nujnega in pomoč ($\alpha = 0,86$), odgovornost in pomoč ($\alpha = 0,82$) in vedeti, kako pomagati ($\alpha = 0,79$).

Tretji je bil Vprašalnik moralne nezavzetosti pri spletnem nasilju (Kos, 2021) z 12 postavkami, ki so merile stopnjo moralnega presojanja študentov s štirimi faktorji: moralno opravičevanje ($\alpha = 0,49$), razpršitev odgovornosti (0,59), razčlovečenje (0,76) in minimaliziranje oz. zmanjševanje škodljivih posledic (0,85).

Po podanem informiranem soglasju so študenti odgovarjali na spletnne vprašalnike. Podatke smo zbirali od marca do aprila 2021. Komfirmatorne faktorske analize so bile izvedene s paketom R lavaan v0.-8; Pearsonove korelacije med spremenljivkami ter analize multiple linearne regresije pa v IBM SPSS Statistics za Windows, različici 25.0.

S pomočjo multiple linearne regresijske analize smo odgovorili na prvo raziskovalno vprašanje – kako sociodemografske spremenljivke (spol in starost študentov ter prosti čas, preživet na spletu) in posamezni faktorji moralne nezavzetosti napovedujejo različno odzivanje študentov v intervencijskem modelu. S spremenljivkami nam je uspelo pri intervencijskem modelu opazovalcev pojasniti največ variance pri razlagi dogodka kot resnega in pomoči potrebnega (27%), najmanj pa pri tem, kako pomagati (9%).

V prvem koraku intervencijskega modela opazovalcev – pri “zaznavi spletnega nasilja” – smo z vsemi vključenimi spremenljivkami pojasnili 12% variance, pri čemer se je kot pomemben napovednik pokazal čas, preživet na spletu. To ni presenetljivo glede na to, da se verjetnost, da je študent priča takšnemu dogodku, povečuje s časom, ki ga preživi na spletu (Adebayo idr., 2019; Balakrishnan, 2015; Costello idr., 2017). Drugi pomemben napovednik je bil faktor moralne nezavzetosti – razčlovečenje. Študenti, ki so manj verjeli, da izklop iz družbenega omrežja zaustavi nasilje ali da nekateri učenci manj trpijo zaradi spletnega nasilja, ker niso tako čustveni, so bili bolj senzibilni in pogosteje zaznavali to nasilje.

V drugem koraku, tj. “razлага dogodka kot resnega in pomoč”, smo s spremenljivkami uspeli pojasniti 27% variance. Pokazalo se je, da so si študentke in tisti študenti, ki so več prostega časa preživeli na spletu, pogosteje razlagali dogodke spletnega nasilja kot resne in bili pripravljeni nuditi pomoč. Ugotovljeno prosocialno usmerjenost deklet s prepričanjem, da morajo pomagati vrstnikom v težavah, potrjujejo tudi druge študije (DeSmet idr., 2016; Ma idr., 2019; Macaulay idr., 2019). Naši rezultati podpirajo tudi ugotovitve Costella idr. (2017), da večja prisotnost študentov na spletu povečuje verjetnost, da bodo posredovali v primeru, če bodo opazili spletno nasilje. Hkrati pa študenti z manj izrazitim moralnim opravičevanjem in manj minimaliziranjem spletnega nasilja dojemajo to nasilje kot bolj resno in so bolj prepričani, da vrstniki, ki ga doživljajo, potrebujejo pomoč.

V tretjem koraku intervencijskega modela “sprejemanje odgovornosti in pomoč” so vključene spremenljivke pojasnile 15% variance med študenti opazovalci. Izkazalo se je, da so starejši študenti zaznavali pri sebi več odgovornosti in bili bolj pripravljeni pomagati. Rezultat je bil pričakovani, saj so starejši študenti že na visoki stopnji moralnega razvoja, s sočasno razvitimi sposobnostmi kritičnega mišljenja (Mason in Gibbs, 1993), kar pri teh študentih prej privede do občutka dolžnosti, da pomagajo. V zvezi z moralno nezavzetostjo smo ugotovili, da manj moralnega opravičevanja in neupoštevanja posledic napoveduje večjo verjetnost, da se bo študent počutil osebno odgovornega za ukrepanje, ko bo priča spletnemu nasilju.

Zadnji korak intervencijskega modela je bil “vedeti, kako pomagati”, pri čemer nam je s spremenljivkami uspelo pojasniti le 9% razlik med študenti. Ugotovljena sta

bila dva pomembna napovednika – starost in dehumanizacija. Rezultati so pokazali, da imajo starejši študenti več znanja o tem, kaj reči ali narediti, da bi pomagali nekomu, ki je doživel spletno nasilje. To je povezano z več izkušnjami, saj so verjetno že preizkusili različne strategije in ugotovili, katere so bolj in katere manj učinkovite. Nepričakovani rezultati pa je bil, da je dehumanizacija pozitiven napovednik vedenja o tem, kako pomagati. Ena od možnih razlag bi bila, da študenti verjamejo, da vedo, kaj storiti, vendar njihovo znanje o strategijah pomoči temelji na napačnih predstavah o spletnem nasilju.

V praktičnih implikacijah ugotavljamo, da imajo študenti opazovalci pomembno vlogo pri poseganju v situacije spletnega nasilja, kar pa je povezano z njihovo moralno zavzetostjo. Zato je pomembno s študenti obravnavati napačna prepričanja (npr. opravičevanje ali banaliziranje incidentov spletnega nasilja; prepričanja, da je možno to nasilje zaustaviti z izklopom interneta) in jim pomagati pri tem, kako se pridobi informacije in spremnosti, ki jih lahko uporabijo, ko se soočijo s spletnim nasiljem. Npr. s kratkimi delavnicami za povečanje ozaveščenosti o spletnem nasilju in njegovih posledicah, o odgovornosti za neagresivno spletno komunikacijo in s strategijami pomoči, z vzpostavljivijo anonimne telefonske linije za prijavo primerov tega nasilja za študente.

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