



Bystander Intervention and Abusive Behavior

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Today, the majority of young adults (ages 18-29) use a social networking website (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter; Duggan & Smith, 2014). With the continued growth of the Internet and technology, perpetrators of stalking have new opportunities to continue abusive behaviors in ways that no longer resemble traditional forms of intimate partner violence (IPV) or stalking. Much remains unknown about the willingness of bystanders to intervene when exposed to these behaviors in an online environment.

Research on bystander intervention and programs for sexual assault and interpersonal violence across college campuses has increased in recent years (e.g., Alegría-Flores, Raker, Pleasants, Weaver, & Weinberger, 2015; Coker et al., 2015). Bystander intervention has been premised on the idea that peers and the community can intervene in ways that help the victim and support the offender (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; McMahon, Postmus, & Koenick, 2011). Though the focus of bystander intervention has tended to focus on intervention prior to or during a sexual assault, McMahon and Banyard (2012) have suggested that intervention behaviors can also include challenging attitudes or comments before an incident occurs. Less is known about the range of behaviors individuals may engage in when exposed to abuse or abusive comments in an online environment compared to a face-to-face incident. The current study examined the types of intervention behaviors respondents reported they would engage in as a bystander when exposed to abuse or abusive comments in their online social network. This action-oriented report presents findings from a study that captured the degree to which respondents would intervene on behalf of a victim or offender in an online environment.

IPV, Stalking, and Cyberstalking

IPV has been defined as, "ongoing or repeated physical, psychological, economic, sexual, verbal, and/or spiritual abuse" (emphasis added; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997, p. 5). Similarly, stalking has typically been defined as repeated behaviors that cause the victim or a "reasonable person" fear (emphasis added; National Center for Victims of Crime, 2007). The repeated nature of stalking and IPV suggests there is overlap in the two concepts (Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2000). Stark (2007) argued that stalking falls within the realm of coercive control; a theoretical perspective on IPV that includes physical and sexual abuse and also tactics designed to control and intimidate the victim, particularly when the majority of stalkers know their victim (Björklund, 2016; Breiding et al., 2014; Logan, 2010). Findings from the 2011 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey indicated the majority of stalkers were current or former intimate partners of those whom they targeted (Breiding et al., 2014).

It is likely that technological advances have made it easier for perpetrators to engage in IPV and stalking (Lindsay, Booth, Messing, & Thaller, 2015; Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2007). Cyberstalking behaviors may include online harassment or threats in emails, chat rooms, or social networking websites (Woodlock, 2016). The offender may post threatening comments about the victim or personal pictures/details inappropriate for public dissemination. Offenders may also post threats to commit murder/suicide online before committing the violent act.

Offline stalking estimates among college samples ranged from 11% to 40% (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2002; Fox, Nobles, & Akers, 2011). Estimates focused exclusively on cyberstalking have found that between 3.7% and 40% of college age students have experienced cyberstalking (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Nobles, Reyns, Fox, & Fisher, 2012; Reyns, Henson, & Fisher, 2012; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Findings indicate college students are at risk of being stalked, especially online. As Shariff and DeMartini (2016) highlighted, the ease of electronic communication has begun to blur the lines between on- and off-line sexual harassment because attitudes can be expressed online. What is especially important about threats made in an online social network is that other individuals in the network may view the threats. In turn, individuals may or may not engage in intervention behaviors.

Offline and Online Bystander Intervention

Recent violence prevention efforts have shifted focus from reducing risk of perpetration or victimization to understanding the role bystanders may play during an incident (McMahon & Banyard, 2012). Slaby and Stringham (1994) found that, for adolescent peer violence, bystanders can either promote continued violence or limit the risk of ongoing violence. Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan (2005) have extended this work and proposed that bystanders who have the capacity for and prosocial beliefs about intervention will intervene in incidents involving interpersonal violence. According to bystander intervention, the focus becomes change at the community level whereby all members of the community are engaged in violence prevention (Banyard et al., 2005). The cyber world may create a community that provides opportunities for intervention. On the other hand, the anonymity of the Internet may also hinder intervention.

The anonymity of the Internet and the physical distance it creates between individuals may reduce the likelihood of bystander intervention (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Three processes may hinder intervention behaviors and include the presence of others, worry that other bystanders will judge ones' actions, or belief that the inaction of others indicates action is not required

(Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970). Taken together, these incident and personal characteristics may influence the likelihood of intervention.

Research on online bystander intervention has focused on cyberbullying among adolescents (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; DeSmets et al., 2014; Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2014). This research has found that individuals intervened in ways that help the victim but also in ways that support the offender (Jones, Mitchell, & Turner, 2015). Markey (2000), the first study of the online bystander effect, reported that individuals were slower to help in Internet chat rooms when others were present but that requests for help from specific participants produced a quicker response. Similarly, a small minority of bystanders offered direct assistance to victims (Olenik-Sheesh, Heiman, & Eden, 2015) and the more bystanders that were present, the less likely an individual was to offer help (Obermaier et al., 2014). In contrast, bystanders were more likely to intervene in cases of cyberbullying when the severity of the incident increased (Bastiaensens et al., 2014; DeSmets et al., 2014), but this effect may have been mediated by the number of onlookers (Obermaier et al., 2014). Gahagan, Vaterlaus, and Frost (2016) found 61% of college students who witnessed cyberbullying on a social networking site did not intervene. While some students reported it was always their responsibility to intervene, others indicated that intervention was based on circumstances. In a study with 37 undergraduate female students, Freis and Gurung (2012) reported personal characteristics associated with offline bystander intervention behaviors also applied in cases of cyberbullying and the majority of respondents used indirect forms of intervention, like avoiding a certain topic.

Methodology

Data came from a cross-sectional paper and pencil survey administered in 11 criminal justice classes at a southeastern university during the Fall, 2015. The survey included questions on cyberstalking victimization and perpetration, willingness to intervene in three cyberstalking scenarios, and a series of scales. Responses were anonymous. At the instructor’s discretion, respondents were offered extra credit. If the respondent elected not to participate in the study an alternative assignment was provided.

Participants. Respondents averaged 20 years old (*S.D.* = 2.57; Range = 18 to 56). Over one third (39.30%) of the sample identified as Latinx, 40.20% identified as White, 19.30% as African American, and 6.70% indicated they were Asian, Middle Eastern, Native Hawaiian/Other, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Other race. The majority of respondents were women (63.50%) and a little less than half (44.30%) were in a relationship at the time of the survey. The majority of respondents (87.50%) indicated at least one of their majors was criminal justice.

Measures. Three scenarios (See Table 1) adapted from Banyard et al. (2005), and Nobles et al. (2012), focused on the respondent’s male friend making abusive comments about his ex-girlfriend on a social networking website. Scenarios increased in severity from behaviors that may be considered borderline cyberstalking, but abusive; to explicit, repeated, threats of violence that clearly met the definition for cyberstalking.

Intervention Behaviors. Following each scenario, respondents were asked to identify which intervention behaviors they would engage in based on an adapted version of Banyard et al.’s (2005) *Intentions to Intervene Scale*. Intervention behaviors were as follows: 1) Confront your male friend by making a comment on the

social networking website, 2) Talk to your male friend about how you are feeling, 3) Offer support to your male friend, 4) Talk to the ex-girlfriend about how you are feeling, 5) Offer support to the ex-girlfriend, 6) Call an resident advisor (RA), counselor, friend, coach, or someone else and ask for their assistance, 7) Report the behavior to an RA, counselor, or coach, 8) Suggest to someone to have an educational program, 9) Call 911, and 10) Do nothing—it is none of my business. Each response was coded so that 1 = “Yes, the respondent would engage in that behavior for that scenario” and 0 = “No, the respondent would not engage in that behavior for that scenario.” Descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.

Table 1. Scenarios Presented to Respondents

Scenario 1	A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. He then proceeds to call his now ex-girlfriend derogatory names on social media. This happens once or twice and he makes no further posts about the ex-girlfriend.
Scenario 2	A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. He makes these comments almost immediately after the break up. These posts then escalate in frequency and are ongoing for several months. He does not make threats to engage in violence in these posts but mostly sticks to calling his ex-girlfriend derogatory names. Occasionally, he writes about his former partner’s location and daily activities (e.g., saw the ex at the dining hall).
Scenario 3	A male friend of yours posts on social media that his girlfriend recently broke up with him. The posts begin with derogatory names for his ex-girlfriend and increase in severity. His most recent post includes threats to visit his ex-girlfriend’s dorm at night and attack her. You read this post around 5 PM, 30 minutes after your male friend posts the threat of violence.

Results

As the severity of the scenario increased, respondents indicated they increased intervention behaviors that had the potential to help the victim. Only 10.33% of respondents stated they would report the behavior to an RA, counselor, or coach for scenario one compared to 80.83% of respondents who said they would report the behavior for scenario three. See Table 2.

The same pattern can be found for calling and asking for assistance (15.83% for scenario one compared to 83.67% for scenario three), suggesting an educational program (20.50% for scenario one compared to 60.00% for scenario three), and calling 911 (2.17% for scenario one compared to 57.17% for scenario three). Across all three scenarios, respondents indicated they would talk to their male friend (85.83% for scenario one compared to 78.00% for scenario three) or offer support to their male friend (85.83% for scenario one compared to 67.00% for scenario three). It is important to note that offers of support to the respondent’s male friend decreased as severity increased. Respondents also stated they would talk to the ex-girlfriend (61.00% for scenario one compared to 84.17% for scenario three) and offer support to the ex-girlfriend (62.50% for scenario one compared to 90.00% for scenario three). As severity escalated, respondents were more likely to intervene in ways that support the victim. Of particular importance, roughly a quarter to a third of respondents indicated they would make a comment on the social networking website. This is important as respondents indicated they were more likely to intervene offline than they were to online.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Scenario	1	2	3
Intervention Behaviors	Mean/ Percent	Mean/ Percent	Mean/ Percent
Make Comment on Social Networking Website	21.00%	32.83%	36.50%
Talk to Male Friend	85.83%	88.33%	78.00%
Offer Support to Male Friend	85.83%	78.17%	67.00%
Talk to Ex-Girlfriend	61.00%	74.83%	84.17%
Offer Support to Ex-Girlfriend	62.50%	75.00%	90.00%
Call and Ask for Assistance	15.83%	45.83%	83.67%
Report Behavior	10.33%	40.50%	80.83%
Suggest Educational Program	20.50%	38.67%	60.00%
Call 911	2.17%	5.67%	57.17%
Do Nothing	5.17%	4.33%	11.17%

Discussion

Initial predictions expected respondents to intervene on the social networking website when exposed to abusive behaviors, though results demonstrated otherwise. Approximately one-third of the sample reported intervention behavior in the two more severe scenarios and approximately one-fifth of the sample reported intervention behavior in the least severe scenario. Instead, respondents reported increased likelihood of offering support to the victim. In addition, as severity increased, respondents increasingly reported a willingness to reach out to RAs, counselors and coaches, or call 911. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated they would engage the incident when exposed to abusive behavior in their online environment.

Importantly, multivariate models (see Hayes, 2018) were not significant across all three scenarios for the intervention behavior that involved confronting the male friend by making a comment on the social networking website. Contrary to expectations, this suggests that attitudes and demographics (e.g., gender, year in school, rape myth acceptance) did not predict online intervention behaviors. It may be that the anonymity of the Internet decreases the likelihood someone intervenes (Dempsey et al., 2009; Sticca & Perren, 2013) and suggests responsibility is diffused across other online individuals (Darley & Latané, 1968; Latané & Darley, 1970). Markey (2000) reported individuals were less likely to help online when other bystanders were present. It is possible online and face-to-face behaviors are different (Allison & Bussey, 2016). An individual may view the online comment after a significant amount of time has passed and therefore may have believed the problem has been resolved.

Implications for Texas

Findings are especially relevant to campus officials at institutions of higher education (IHE). Universities across the state of Texas and the United States are incorporating bystander training for incoming students per the recommendations explicitly mentioned in the White House Task Force Report (White House, 2014). While many of the bystander intervention programs have focused on sexual assault, there is promise that these trainings can address interpersonal violence generally. As more and more students use social networking websites, both in Texas and across the United States, it would be worthwhile for IHEs to determine if and how intervention behaviors may extend offline to online.

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