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Editorial: Special issue on bystanders of online aggression

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Online aggression — and especially cyberbullying — are topics which have gained substantial attention from researchers as well as public in the past years. While online aggression denotes any aggressive incidents conducted through information and communication technology, cyberbullying is a specific form of this aggressive behavior characterized by the repetition of intended harm via digital media (see e.g., Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Smith & Steffgen, 2013). Though the first years of research in this field were dominated by a focus on victimization, there is currently growing attention centered on the experiences of those who witness aggressive incidents online — that is, the bystanders of online aggression.

This attention on bystanders is highly warranted since their roles are often pivotal in the whole process. Online aggression often takes place in the virtual presence of bystanders (Jones, Mitchell, & Turner, 2015). Similar to offline aggression and bullying (Cowie & Hutson, 2005; Salmivalli, 2010), the responses and reactions of bystanders can influence the course and consequences of the online incidents (Pfetsch, Steffgen, Gollwitzer, & Ittel, 2011). These responses can take on many forms (Pfetsch, 2016; Shultz, Heilman, & Hart 2014), including, in general, offering support to the victim, reinforcing the aggressive acts, or remaining passive.

To understand bystander reactions, prior research focused on several individual characteristics, such as age and gender differences, empathy, coping, self-efficacy, anxiety and loneliness, or prior victimization (e.g., Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013; Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016; Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, & Eden, 2017; Steffgen, Costa, & Slee, 2018; Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Moreover, attention has been given to the specific context of the online incidents. Though there is ongoing fruitful discussion concerning the specificity of the online aggression, especially with regard to bullying and cyberbullying (Menesini, 2012; Olweus, 2012; Olweus & Limber, 2018), there are several features of online aggression which should be recognized because they can create the specific context which may affect bystanders' responses. For instance, online bystanders can be distant from all of the actors and they can be invisible and unidentifiable, while the other actors can be also unknown and invisible to the bystanders (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross, 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Contextual factors, such as anonymity or proximity, have also been examined, as well as other factors, including the relationship to a victim or aggressor (e.g., Brody & Vangelisti, 2016; Machackova, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2016; Sticca & Perren, 2013).

So far, the research on the bystanders of online aggression has provided some explanations concerning the nature of their responses. However, many questions still remain unanswered or require more robust empirical evidence. These questions concern, for instance, the contextual factors which differentiate the responses of the bystanders of offline and online aggression, the assessments of the severity of the online incidents, and the interplay between the individual and contextual factors. Responding to the need to gain more insight into such topics, we decided to launch a special issue to address the different aspects related to the bystanders of online aggression.

The Papers in This Issue

An invitation for submissions for a special issue on the Bystanders of Online Aggression was published in January 2018. Our call was open to studies of diverse bystander populations. We invited contributions which would examine the different aspects related to online aggression, including issues related to bystanders' assessments of as well as responses to the incidents. We were interested in papers which would focus on the role of and interplay between individual and contextual factors in these regards, and which would (directly or indirectly) enrich the prevention and intervention efforts. We also invited articles which would provide empirical analyses of theoretical models and which would use unique and innovative methods.

Following this call, we received 24 research abstracts, of which 12 were invited to submit a full paper. Each full paper was reviewed by two respected scholars in the field, at least one special issue editor, and the regular editors. In the end, six final papers were included in this issue. We believe that these papers provide deeper understanding and insight into the studied issues and present unique contribution to the field.

The first study in this issue (Domínguez-Hernández, Bonell, & Martínez-González, 2018) is a systematic literature review focusing on youth bystanders of cyberbullying and online aggression. Though there are still many questions and research gaps in the field, past research has already brought insights into the factors which may play a role in bystander responses towards online aggression. Acknowledging this, the authors center their review on the personal and contextual factors which may facilitate or inhibit the bystanders' actions. They provide a systematic overview of these factors, discuss their interplay in the online aggressive incidents, and provide practical recommendations.

The second article (Schultze-Krumbholz, Hess, Pfetsch, & Scheithauer, 2018) elaborates on the role of personal factors in cyberbullying. Using a data-driven and person-oriented approach, and overcoming the classical differentiation among bullies, victims, and bystanders, this paper offers deeper insight into the participant roles of cyberbullying. The results of a Latent Class Analysis identify five roles in cyberbullying, differentiating, for example, between aggressive and prosocial bystanders. Moreover, the authors define the specific groups of participants via examined associations with aggression, self-esteem, and empathy. This study thus offers more elaborated and detailed insight into possible involvement in cyberbullying and it helps to understand which youth tend to respond and engage in cyberbullying.

The next two articles use theoretical frameworks which have proven fruitful in the explanation of bystander responses to cyberbullying (Allison & Bussey, 2016): the Bystander Intervention Model (Latané & Darley, 1970) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986).

The third article in the issue (Knauf, Eschenbeck, & Hock, 2018) compares the social-cognitive and affective reactions to the self-reported experiences of witnessing bullying and cyberbullying. The findings show that bystanders of cyberbullying incidents reported stronger moral disengagement, lower feelings of responsibility, lower defender self-efficacy, and, surprisingly, lower negative outcome expectations for defending. Against expectations, there were no differences in empathy towards the victim. Considering these findings, this study contributes and elaborates upon the discussion centered on the differences between bullying and cyberbullying.

The question concerning the cognitive processes that affect the willingness to help the victim was also examined in detail in an experimental study that manipulated the severity of the aggressive incident (Koehler & Weber, 2018). The authors of this fourth article show that the incidents that were assessed as more severe triggered a higher tendency to help the victim, while less severe incidents ended in a higher tendency to blame the victim, which is connected with lower tendency to provide help. Thus, this article contributes to existing research by showing how different types of online aggressive incidents prompt bystander responses and what is the role of cognitive processes.

A different and novel approach was adopted in the fifth article (Ouvrein, Backer, & Vandebosch, 2018), which focuses on the negativity and aggression in celebrity-news articles and the reader discussions that follow. Qualitative and quantitative content analysis showed how readers respond to diverse types of news, pointing out the role of the articles' tone and topic. The authors also describe different strategies and types of aggressive-

reader responses and discuss the “negativity spiral”. Their findings contribute to the understanding of the types and dynamics of aggression within news-audience comments and the diverse strategies applied in response to aggressive content.

The final paper of this special issue (Wright, Wachs, & Harper, 2018) examines a topic which has not been thoroughly addressed before in the empirical research — the negative psychological impact of the bystanders’ experiences (in the form of increased anxiety and depression). Though there is a body of research on the consequences of cybervictimization, the research on bystanders is scarce in this regard. However, understanding the impact of these experiences is important for prevention and intervention efforts, especially in the adolescent population, which is in the focus of this study. Using a longitudinal design, the authors provide evidence for the harmful impact of witnessing online aggression, especially for youth with higher empathy. Based on these findings, the authors formulate specific implications and enrich the discussion concerning the role of empathy in bystanders’ experiences with online aggression.

As guest editors, we would like to thank all the authors and all the reviewers who so kindly helped and contributed to this special issue; we would also like to thank the editors of Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace for great and smooth collaboration.

We hope that this special issue provides new insights into the topic and that it will enrich academic and public discussions concerning bystanders of online aggression.

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About the Journal

The Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace is a web-based, peer-reviewed scholarly journal. The first peer-reviewed issue was published in September 2007. The journal is focused on social science research about cyberspace. It brings psychosocial reflections of the impact of the Internet on people and society. The journal is interdisciplinary, publishing works written by scholars of psychology, media studies, communication science, sociology, political science, nursing, ICT security, organizational psychology and also other disciplines with relevance to psychosocial aspects of cyberspace. The journal accepts original research articles, as well as theoretical studies and research meta-analyses. Proposals for special issues are also welcomed.

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Jan Pfetsch, Ph.D., is a guest professor and the deputy head of the Department of Educational Psychology at Technische Universität, Berlin, Germany. He developed a bystander intervention training program in the context of offline bullying at school. His current research focuses on cyberbullying (especially cyberbystanders), empathy in offline and online contexts, media use and media literacy, the development of competencies in teacher training (especially diagnostic competence), learning with digital media, and aggressive and prosocial behavior in children and adolescents.

Georges Steffgen, Ph.D., is a professor of social psychology and the head of the research group Health Promotion and Aggression Prevention at the University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg. His current research focuses on aggression (violence, cyberbullying) and emotion regulation. He has been the project manager of national and international scientific projects on violence in school, victimization, and the quality of work. He has authored more than 50 papers in international journals, and he is the editor or co-editor of 16 books. He co-chaired COST Action IS0801 on Cyberbullying.