

A Social Cognitive Theory Approach to Cyber Bystanders: The Good, Bad, and Indifferent

Un Enfoque de la Teoría Social Cognitiva para Espectadores Virtuales: Lo Bueno, lo Malo y lo Indiferente

Uma Abordagem da Teoria Social Cognitiva para Espectadores Virtuais: O Bom, o Mau e o Indiferente

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Abstract

Cyberbullying has become a focus of recent research as the risk of experiencing cyberbullying has increased exponentially over the past decade. This is due to the increased use of the internet by the general community as well as adolescents especially on social network platforms where most cyberbullying occurs. To combat the problem of adolescent bullying many school-based interventions have been developed. Although these programs have had a moderate degree of success, cyberbullying persists. The focus of most antibullying programs has been on the bully and the victim. However, there have been mounting calls to increase the effectiveness of these programs by harnessing the assistance of the many students who witness cyberbullying. Most adolescents who witness cyberbullying do nothing and remain passive. When they do intervene, they are mostly successful in reducing bullying when they respond constructively. The paper aims to explicate a social cognitive theory model of cyber bystanders that can be used as a basis for developing an intervention program to increase constructive bystanding responses. Bandura's social cognitive theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexity of bullying dynamics in cyber space. The theory considers the social context in which cyberbullying occurs and the major sociocognitive processes of self-regulation (moral disengagement, self-efficacy, social expectations) that are involved in understanding cyber bystanding.

Keywords: Cyberbullying. Moral Disengagement. Self-Efficacy.



Resumen

El ciberacoso se ha convertido en un tema central de investigación reciente, ya que el riesgo de experimentar ciberacoso ha aumentado exponencialmente en la última década. Esto se debe al mayor uso de Internet por parte de la comunidad en general y, especialmente, por los adolescentes en plataformas de redes sociales, donde ocurre la mayoría de los casos de ciberacoso. Para combatir el problema del acoso entre adolescentes, se han desarrollado muchas intervenciones escolares. Aunque estos programas han logrado un grado moderado de éxito, el ciberacoso persiste. La mayoría de los programas contra el acoso escolar se han centrado en el acosador y la víctima. Sin embargo, ha habido un llamado creciente a aumentar la efectividad de estos programas aprovechando la asistencia de los muchos estudiantes que son testigos del ciberacoso. La mayoría de los adolescentes que presencian el ciberacoso no hacen nada y permanecen pasivos. Cuando intervienen, suelen tener éxito en reducir el acoso al responder de manera constructiva. Este artículo tiene como objetivo explicar un modelo de la teoría social cognitiva sobre los espectadores virtuales, que puede usarse como base para desarrollar un programa de intervención para aumentar las respuestas constructivas de los espectadores. La teoría social cognitiva de Bandura proporciona un marco integral para comprender la complejidad de las dinámicas de acoso en el ciberespacio. La teoría considera el contexto social en el que ocurre el ciberacoso y los principales procesos sociocognitivos de autorregulación (desconexión moral, autoeficacia, expectativas sociales) involucrados en la comprensión de las acciones de los espectadores virtuales.

Palabras Clave: Ciberacoso. Desconexión moral. Autoeficacia.

Resumo

O cyberbullying tornou-se um foco de pesquisa recente, à medida que o risco de vivenciar cyberbullying aumentou exponencialmente na última década. Isso se deve ao aumento do uso da internet pela comunidade em geral, especialmente por adolescentes, nas plataformas de redes sociais onde a maior parte do cyberbullying ocorre. Para combater o problema do bullying entre adolescentes, muitas intervenções escolares foram desenvolvidas. Embora esses programas tenham obtido um grau moderado de sucesso, o cyberbullying persiste. O foco da maioria dos programas antibullying tem sido o agressor e a vítima. No entanto, há um apelo crescente para aumentar a eficácia desses programas ao aproveitar a assistência de muitos estudantes que testemunham o cyberbullying. A maioria dos adolescentes que presencia o cyberbullying não faz nada e permanece passiva. Quando intervêm, geralmente têm sucesso em reduzir o bullying ao responder de maneira construtiva. Este artigo busca explicitar um modelo da teoria social cognitiva sobre espectadores virtuais que pode ser usado como base para o desenvolvimento de um programa de intervenção para aumentar respostas construtivas de espectadores. A teoria social cognitiva de Bandura fornece uma estrutura abrangente para compreender a complexidade das dinâmicas de bullying no ciberespaço. A teoria considera o contexto social em que o cyberbullying ocorre e os principais processos sociocognitivos de autorregulação (desengajamento moral, autoeficácia, expectativas sociais) envolvidos na compreensão das ações dos espectadores virtuais.

Palavras-chave: Cyberbullying. Desengajamento moral. Autoeficácia.

1 Introduction

Bullying among children and adolescents is widely reported throughout the world as a major public health problem (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). It is defined as intentional aggression that is repeatedly directed to someone who is unable to defend themselves (Olweus, 1991). It can occur offline (in-person) and online (using technology). Offline bullying occurs through physical, verbal and socially interactive means whereas cyberbullying involves a diverse array of behaviors such as sending mean emails or messages and embarrassing images through electronic means (Kowalski *et al.*, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2008). Both offline and online bullying are widespread among youth with estimates ranging from 6.0% to 46.3% for cyberbullying perpetration and from 13.99% to 57.5% for cyberbullying victimization (Zhu *et al.*, 2021) depending on the definition used, the time span covered, and the age, gender, and ethnic composition of the sample. All forms of bullying can have adverse consequences for those who experience it. These include negative effects on wellbeing, school achievement, social relationships, and suicidal thoughts through to actual suicide (Alavi *et al.*, 2017; Jadambaa, 2020).

In the early approaches to studying bullying, the focus was on the dyad involving the bully and victim (Olweus, 1991). However, in more recent research there has been greater attention given to bystanders, the other participants in bullying episodes (Salmivalli, 2014). Not only are these additional participants frequent observers of bullying episodes, but when they intervene, they have the potential to stop the bullying and comfort the victim (Hawkins *et al.*, 2001). By intervening in bullying episodes, bystanders may hold the key to significantly reduce bullying and its impact (e.g. Salmivalli, 2014; Salmivalli *et al.*, 2013). However, most witnesses of bullying do not intervene, rather, they simply passively observe the bullying (De Smet *et al.*, 2016). As a result, anti-bullying programs have begun to encourage witnesses to become defenders (those who step in to help the victim). However, these programs have minimal theoretical guidance about how to encourage witnesses to become defenders. Although there has been a significant uptick in research investigating the correlates of bystander responses, there has been little advance in theoretical explanations of such responses. This paper provides a theoretical analysis of bystander responses to witnessing bullying from the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory (1986). Due to the increased use of the internet and the concomitant rise in cyberbullying, the focus of this paper is on adolescent bystanders to cyberbullying. It provides a conceptual analysis of cyber bystanders from a Social Cognitive Theory perspective

by outlining the triadic model of reciprocal interaction in which cyber bystander behavior is considered in relation to person and environment factors. Following this, future directions for an anti-bullying intervention focused on bystanders to cyberbullying from the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory is discussed.

2 Social Cognitive Theory of Cyber Bullying Bystanders

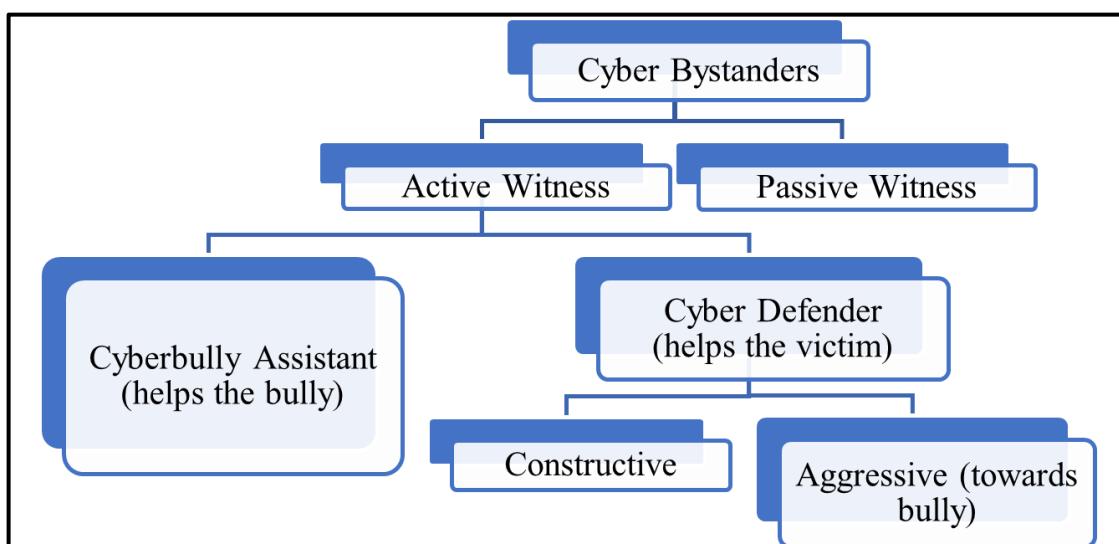
Social Cognitive Theory lends itself for understanding cyber bystanders' responses as it considers the complex social context of the peer group and school community in which cyberbullying occurs as well as the personal factors of those involved in cyberbullying (Bandura, 2023). By drawing on Social Cognitive Theory, this paper provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexity of cyber bystanders' responses to witnessing cyberbullying (Bandura, 2023; Bussey, 2023). This approach to bystander behavior involves the triadic model in which personal factors, environmental events, and bystander behaviors reciprocally influence each other. The person contribution includes conceptions and beliefs about cyber bystander behavior, standards relating to cyber bystander behavior, and self-regulatory influences. Environment factors include the vast network of influences on cyber bystanders from direct influences by peers, parents, educators, the social media to more indirect influences of the overarching cultural environment in which cyberbullying occurs. Behavior refers to the broad range of cyber bystander responses that extend from helping the cyberbully, helping the victim, to doing nothing.

2.1 Cyber Bystanders Behavior

Cyber bystanders are not a unitary group. Rather, from the Social Cognitive Theory perspective, bystander behavior comprises a multi-dimensional group of behaviors that involve positive, though to negative and indifferent forms of responding (see Figure 1). At the highest level of categorization is the distinction between active and passive bystanders. Active witnesses are not a unitary group as they respond in diverse ways to witnessing cyberbullying. The first major distinction within active bystanders is between those who help the bully and those who help the victim. Those who help the bully can do so by showing their support by reinforcing the bullying behavior (encouraging the bully by liking or reacting positively to bullying posts or messages) or assisting the bully (joining the bullying by sharing a mean post). In contrast, there are those

who help the victim and are referred to as defenders. Defending behaviors include comforting the victim, reporting the cyberbullying, and/or telling the bully to stop. Recent research, however, reveals the darker side of defenders with some responding aggressively towards the bully (Bussey *et al.*, 2020). This response to witnessing has the potential to escalate the cyberbullying rather than stopping it. Although most studies in the past have used an omnibus measure of defending that includes all forms of defending including both constructive and aggressive defending, more recent research has distinguished between these the different forms of defending (Bussey *et al.*, 2020; Luo; Bussey, 2019). This separation is important as the two forms of defending have been shown to relate to different sociocognitive process (Bussey *et al.*, 2020). Higher levels of defending self-efficacy were associated with greater constructive defending and less aggressive defending whereas higher levels of moral disengagement were associated with more aggressive defending and less constructive defending. These findings contribute to further understanding the theoretical underpinning of the different bystander responses, but also provides information about the psychological processes which should be targeted for more effective anti-bullying interventions. To understand which of these cyber bystander behaviors will be performed it is necessary to consider both personal and environment factors.

Figure 1 - Multidimensionality of Bystander Behaviours.



Source: Authors.

In addition to active bystanders there are passive bystanders who are typically the largest category of bystanders confirming decades of research on the bystander effect (De Smet et al., 2016). Historically, research on the bystander effect has emphasised the complacency of bystanders (Allison; Bussey, 2016; Darley; Latané, 1968; Song; Oh, 2018), indicating that increasing the motivation for bystanders to intervene is necessary to increase positive bystander behavior. However, recent research has found that many cyberbullying bystanders who remain passive wish to respond positively but lack the knowledge of how to do this effectively or believe that their actions would have no positive influence, or fear consequences to themselves for responding (Jackson et al., 2024). The application of Social Cognitive Theory can enable a better understanding of the reasons for passive bystander responding, and therefore the most appropriate sociocognitive processes to target in anti-bullying programs.

2.2 Environment Factors Linked to Cyber Bystanding

Environment influences the acquisition of conceptions and competencies relating to cyberbullying bystanders. Similar to other influences, the environment is not a fixed entity. While individuals mainly function within the environment that impinges on them, they can also select their environments and even create more tolerant and less reactive ones (Bandura, 2023). Apart from the overarching indirect influence of the environmental context are the more direct social influences from peers, parents, educators, and the media which are nested in specific contexts. These sources of influence convey information about the different forms of bystander responses and evaluative outcomes associated with performing them through three main modes. These modes involve modelling of different bystander behaviors, evaluative feedback for different types of bystander responses, and direct communication about possible bystander responses. These are modeled by all the sources of social influence, that is, parents, peers, educators, and social media among others.

2.2.1 Direct Influences

Peers. Peers provide a major source of learning about cyber bystander behavior as cyberbullying is frequently witnessed peers. Unlike information on cyberbullying perpetration which is uniformly condemned there is variation in the acceptability of different bystander responses which contributes to the variation in students' beliefs about bystander responses.

Although adolescents may appreciate the virtues of helping the victim, they mostly observe their peers remaining passive without any consequences. It is thus not surprising that passive responding to witnessing cyberbullying is the predominant response to observing cyberbullying (Macháčková *et al.*, 2016). They may also observe a sizable number of students aligning with the perpetrator by either joining in with the bullying or supporting the bully by aggressing against the victim. In contrast, other peers may be observed attempting to constructively help the victim and as indicated above, this can involve trying to comfort the victim, reporting the bullying and/or constructively attempting to stop the bullying. Students are not uniformly praised for their helping and sometimes receive negative reactions from other students and are even bullied (Jackson *et al.*, 2024; Thornberg *et al.*, 2018).

Parents. Parents' interactions with their adolescents also affect adolescent defending behavior. Parents who engaged warmly, in a positive manner with their adolescent were more likely to have adolescents who defended victims constructively by reporting the cyberbullying. In contrast, rejecting and overprotective parenting has been associated with a lack of intervention (Chen, 2024). Further highlighting the role of parenting practices for promoting adolescent defending, the use of restorative justice which focuses on the sensitivity of others has been associated with adolescents' constructive bystander behavior but not with their use of aggressive bystander interventions (Garcia-Vazquez *et al.*, 2024). Apart from parents sensitizing their adolescents to the needs of others, parental monitoring of their adolescent's behavior also plays a role in adolescent cyber-aggression (Levy; Sela-Shayovitz, 2020). Parents who monitored their adolescent's behavior by encouraging disclosure and enabled their adolescent to share their experiences of cyber-aggression were more likely to positively defend the victim. In contrast, adolescents whose parents who used tech-based tools to monitor their adolescent's behavior were more likely to support the aggressor. Therefore, parents who actively encourage their adolescents to discuss their online activities in a positive accepting environment rather than scrutinising the activities of their adolescent in a judgemental manner are more likely to have adolescents who engage in positive defending behavior.

Educators. Educators can play an important role in promoting anti-bullying classroom and school norms. Teachers, for example, can actively create class climates that foster cooperation and positive interaction which can affect behavior such as reducing bullying and passive bystanders, and promoting defending (Thornberg *et al.*, 2017; Thornberg *et al.*, 2022). Warm teacher-student relationships have been associated with greater defending of victims

(Jungert *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, when educators verbally endorse an anti-bullying stance, but do nothing in response to reports of bullying incidents, students can lose faith in the effectiveness and worth of reporting bullying to school staff (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). As most of this research has been conducted with in-person bullying, further research specifically on the impact of teacher influence on cyber bystander responses is needed. It is important that educators and parents work together so that bullying that occurs in cyber space does not fall between the cracks with little oversight by either adults.

Social media. Social media platforms can play a role in both censuring cyberbullying perpetration and in encouraging constructive defending through the reporting of observed cyberbullying. A major difference between in-person and online cyberbullying is that defenders can report the cyberbullying anonymously without having to reveal their identity. The anonymity of reporting and the availability of avenues for reporting cyberbullying increases the potential for reporting such behavior. However, these reporting possibilities lose their potency if nothing is done in response to such reports (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). To address this concern there is increasing pressure by government agencies worldwide for social media platforms to monitor and take action against negative cyber interactions. However, there has been minimal compliance with this request. As with the in-person bullying when students report cyberbullying and nothing happens, they become disillusioned in the norms not being upheld and they in turn are sometimes bullied for being whistle-blowers (Jackson *et al.*, 2024).

2.2.2 Indirect Influences

Cultural norms. Beyond the direct influences of peers, the school and family, the wider cultural context also impacts bystander behavior. It provides the backdrop within which the direct influences operate. While studies on defending behavior have been conducted across the world (Zhu *et al.*, 2021), there has been minimal research comparing defending behavior in different cultural contexts. As with cyberbullying generally, little is known about the cultural variation in bystander behavior (Carlson; Fraser, 2018; Sheanoda *et al.*, 2021). How are bystanders viewed in different cultures? Are they encouraged or silenced? While calling out others' antisocial behavior can be viewed negatively and regarded as "dobbing", and by others as moral courage. Different cultural views of prosocial behavior may partially explain these differences. Research on prosocial behavior more generally has shown there is variation within and across cultures in the value of different forms of prosocial behaviors such as cooperation

(Carlo; Padilla-Walker, 2020). However, cultural nuances in defending behavior have received little research attention. A culturally informed approach to cyberbullying defending may provide a better understanding of how to promote cyberbullying defending especially in an increasingly globalized social media landscape.

Gendered norms and stereotypes. Gendered norms and stereotypes may also play an important role in gender differences in defending. Most, but not all, studies report that girls are more likely to defend victims of bullying than boys, with little evidence that boys engage in defending to a greater extent than girls (Barlińska *et al.*, 2018). These differences have been reported for in-person bullying and to a lesser extent with cyberbullying. This gender difference is typically explained by higher levels of empathic concern amongst females than males and higher levels of prosocial behavior in general (Van der Graaff *et al.*, 2018). It is possible that because of the anonymity of cyberspace that gender norms may not be as evident compared to in-person reporting as there is no need for the reporter to provide their gender.

2.3 Person Influences on Bystander Behavior

Simply having learned about various ways to respond to witnessing cyberbullying does not mean that the behavior will be performed. From the agentic Social Cognitive Theory perspective, the performance of behavior is regulated by three major sociocognitive factors: social expectations, self-expectations, and self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 2023). These regulators of conduct are informed by the various forms social influence that have been discussed in the previous section. This information, however, is conveyed in different ways by different people in different contexts. For example, there are differences between the messages conveyed by parents and peers and even the peer group does not speak with one voice. Students assimilate this information in diverse ways depending on the weight assigned to the various sources. As children move into adolescence they may begin to give increasing weight to the views of peers compared to parents. From this diverse information, adolescents form sociocognitive conceptions of outcome expectations, self-expectations, and self-efficacy beliefs which are used to guide their behavior.

Cyberbullying Social Expectations. Adolescents form their social expectations for the different bystander behaviors by the outcomes they see others receive, the outcomes they receive, and those they are informed about from various sources. They integrate these diverse

outcomes information to form predictions about the possible outcomes for their defending or passive behavior in the context of a particular cyberbullying episode. The outcomes that youth anticipate for bystanding behavior also vary for the different types of bystander responses.

Defending has been associated with adolescents anticipating that their behavior would help the victim to feel better, that bullying would decrease, and their own social status would increase (DeSmet *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, passive bystanding has been associated with varied expectations such as self-protection and not believing that their intervention would decrease bullying (DeSmet *et al.*, 2016; Jackson *et al.*, 2024) which serves to justify the lack of responding to witnessing cyberbullying.

Although it has been assumed that witnesses may be more apprehensive about intervening in cyberbullying than offline bullying, Kanauf *et al.* (2018) found that negative outcome expectations were weaker in cyber space. This was attributed to the distance separating the witness and perpetrator and the potential for the witness to stay anonymous. So, although the anonymity of cyber space can facilitate cyberbullying perpetration, it also has the potential for increasing witness intervention. Behaving morally to defend victims, however, does not come without peril. In some cases, it can lead to negative consequences to the helper (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). In those situations where serious negative consequence are expected for helping, it requires significant moral courage to intervene. This suggests that anti-bullying programs need to do more than promote witness intervention; they need to provide explicit instruction about how to intervene safely.

Bystander Self-Expectations: From the social cognitive theory perspective bystander behavior is also regulated in conjunction with self-expectations. Self-expectations provide self-direction based on personal standards (Bandura, 1986). These standards are part of the broader Social Cognitive Theory of moral agency (1986) involving the dual aspects of moral agency of refraining from behaving inhumanely and proactively behaving humanely (Bandura, 2002).

This duality in moral agency accommodates the multidimensional model of bystander presented here. The inhibitive component involves standards that condemn aggressive behavior (inhibitive aggressive standards) and the proactive component refers to acting positively toward others by assisting those in need (proactive prosocial standards). The engagement of these personal standards enables the regulation of behavior, involving the ability to monitor one's own behavior and judge it against those standards. When behavior is expected to fall short of one's personal standards, the anticipation of negative self-reactions is expected to keep behavior

in line with personal standards. In contrast, adherence to personal standards leads to the anticipation of pride and positive self-reactions. Through the anticipation of negative and positive self-reactions for the alignment of behavior with personal standards, conduct is congruent with standards. The personal standards provide the guidance and self-expectations regulate the alignment of personal standards with behavior.

2.3.1 Proactive Prosocial Standards

Prosocial standards comprise the proactive component of moral agency (Bandura, 2002) and relate to defending behavior which is considered a prosocial behavior (Jenkins; Fredrick, 2017). Prosocialness has been associated with defending victims of bullying (Thornberg; Wanstrom, 2018) and friendliness (Tani *et al.*, 2003), which is considered an aspect of concern for others. In more nuanced research, a study investigated the relationship between prosocialness in cyberspace by differentiating between constructive and aggressive defenders, finding that endorsement of prosocial values was associated with constructive but not aggressive defending (Barton *et al.*, 2024). This implies that aggressive defending is driven more by retaliation against the bully than concern for the victim.

Although defending behavior has been generally regarded as prosocial behavior, this is not a unanimous view and may explain why so many observers of cyberbullying remain silent. For some, bystander intervention is viewed negatively as it is construed as “dobbing” on the perpetrator and being a “busy body”, not minding one’s own business. This ambiguity about reporting witnessed cyberbullying is underscored by witness reports that nothing happens when they report the bullying coupled with a fear of retaliation from the bully. For these reasons the prosocial proactive moral standard loses its potency in the cyberbullying domain and may explain why the predominant response to witnessing cyberbullying is to do nothing and remain passive rather than defend the victim. It is imperative that witnesses are provided with safe ways to report cyberbullying so that does it not put them at risk of retaliation from the bully.

2.3.2 Inhibitive Aggressive Standards

For inhibitive aggressive standards, there is almost universal condemnation of the inhumanity of aggressive behavior, that it is wrong and unacceptable behavior (Bandura, 2016; Bussey, 2020). It could be expected that if these standards were adhered to there would be

minimal aggressive and bullying behavior and no need for observers to defend victims. This is clearly not the case. Individuals selectively adopt these inhibitive aggressive moral standards in some situations and not in others by using moral disengagement mechanisms. Moral disengagement is a concept introduced by Bandura (2002, 2016) to explain the mismatch between the endorsement of moral standards and the performance of aggressive behavior.

The research on moral disengagement was initially undertaken with perpetrators of bullying to explain how cognitive strategies could be used to justify behaviour that is known to be wrong (Bandura *et al.*, 1996). Most children understand that bullying and aggression are wrong during the preschool years (Bussey, 2020) and soon after adopt moral standards rejecting aggression. Bullying is regarded as wrong. Activating moral disengagement mechanisms (moral justification, advantageous comparison, euphemistic labelling, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, attribution of blame and dehumanization) enable the performance of bullying behavior without feeling remorse for violating moral standards (Bandura, 2016; Luo; Bussey, 2019; Killer *et al.*, 2019).

More recently, the use of moral disengagement strategies has also been investigated with cyberbullying bystanders (Bussey *et al.*, 2020; Luo; Bussey, 2019; Thornberg; Jungert, 2013). The behavior of bystanders who assist the bully is enabled by the activation of moral disengagement mechanisms (Gini 2008; Sjögren *et al.*, 2020; Thornberg; Jungert, 2013). Through engaging one or other of these mechanisms, witnesses can justify their lack of intervention in a bullying episode and remain passive without feeling any upsetsmith. For defending the victim, both in offline and online studies, moral disengagement has mostly been negatively associated with defending or not associated with it at all (Killer *et al.*, 2019; Song; Oh, 2018; Thornberg; Jungert, 2013, 2014; Thornberg *et al.*, 2017; Yang; Gao, 2023).

In more recent studies, however, that have considered constructive and aggressive cyber defending separately, the association between moral disengagement and constructive cyber defending is similar to the results of the omnibus measure of defending in that the relationship with moral disengagement is either negative or there is no relationship (Bussey *et al.*, 2020; Moxey; Bussey, 2020). In contrast, aggressive defending has been positively associated with moral disengagement (Bussey *et al.*, 2020; Moxey; Bussey, 2020). Indeed, one or more moral disengagement mechanisms can be differentially recruited to justify aggressive responding compared to passive responding (Bussey *et al.*, 2024). By delineating the associations of different moral disengagement mechanisms with specific bystander behaviours, anti-bullying

programs could better identify and challenge the most relevant moral disengagement mechanisms that are differentially associated with aggressive or passive responding.

2.3.3 Bystander Self-Efficacy Beliefs

A pivotal component of social cognitive theory when applied to bystander behaviour is personal agency, which refers to an individual's ability to develop and direct their actions towards a specific task (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to organise the motivation, cognitive resources, skills and actions required to execute an activity successfully (Bandura, 1986; 1997). In the domain of cyber bystanders, defending self-efficacy and empathic self-efficacy have received the most attention in explaining cyberbullying defending behavior.

Defending self-efficacy. Defending self-efficacy is defined as an individual's self-perceived ability to successfully intervene in a bullying episode to help the victim (Thornberg *et al.*, 2017). It has been found to be a strong predictor of defending behavior. Specifically, those who believed they had the skills to intervene successfully in cyberbullying episodes were more likely to do so (Clark; Bussey, 2020; Gini *et al.*, 2022; Leung, 2021). In addition, in those studies that have differentiated between constructive and aggressive defending self-efficacy was positively associated with constructive defending and negatively associated with aggressive defending (Bussey *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, passive bystanding has been negatively associated with cyber defending suggesting that a lack of beliefs in defending skills may be an inhibitor to engaging in such behavior (Gini *et al.*, 2008; Sjögren *et al.*, 2024). Boosting defending self-efficacy beliefs may therefore provide an avenue for increasing cyber bystanders' constructive responses.

Empathic self-efficacy. Empathic self-efficacy is defined as an individual's self-perceived ability to sense the emotions of others and to respond empathetically (Eklund *et al.*, 2012). Its association with prosociality (Caprara *et al.*, 2012; Eklund *et al.*, 2012) suggests its link with defending which is conceived as a form of prosocial behavior. To this point, empathy has been associated with defending behavior for offline and online bullying (Barlińska *et al.*, 2013; Hu *et al.*, 2023) and more specifically empathic self-efficacy has been associated with greater cyber defending (Clarke; Bussey, 2020). This connection of empathic self-efficacy with cyber defending behavior has important implications for anti-bullying intervention programs.

It provides a direction for intervention programs to boost empathic self-efficacy beliefs based on the training model proposed by Bandura (1997) and outlined by Clark and Bussey (2020). This model involves personal mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and considers emotional state to provide information about cyber defending behaviors and their use in specific situations to boost self-confidence.

Collective self-efficacy. Collective self-efficacy refers to the beliefs of a group in being able to stop bullying (Bandura, 2023; Barchia; Bussey, 2011). As bullying typically occurs in the presence of peers, the group plays a central part in determining the initiation and maintenance of bullying. For in-person bullying, collective efficacy that assesses students' and teachers' perceived capabilities to stop peer aggression has been shown to reduce aggression and promote defending (Barchia; Bussey, 2011; Sjögren *et al.*, 2020; Thornberg *et al.*, 2020). Extending this to the cyber context, strong teacher-rated school collective self-efficacy has been associated with lower levels of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization (Olsson *et al.*, 2017). While no studies, however, have specifically examined the influence of collective self-efficacy on cyber bystanders' responses, it has the potential to promote cyber defending.

3 Interplay between the Three Components of the Triadic Model of Reciprocal Interaction

From the perspective of the Social Cognitive Theory of moral agency, behavior is co-determined by environment and personal factors. Each of these three components of the model, person, behavior and environment, that have been described above come into play to varying extents in different situations. The specific manner in which they interact with each other and are assimilated to oversee and regulate conduct varies across time and context. For example, depending on the environment, different person factors come into play and hence influence the expression of behavior which in turn influences the activation of specific environmental influences. When teachers interact in a positive supportive manner with their students, defending increases and victimization and bullying reduce, moral disengagement decreases and further propels defending and less bullying and victimization which further contributes to reductions in moral disengagement and the boosting of defender self-efficacy.

4 Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has underscored the important role of cyber bystanders in cyberbullying episodes. A comprehensive theoretical analysis of cyber bystanding from the perspective of Social Cognitive Theory has been presented, unpacking the sociocognitive processes associated with cyber defending and the situational factors affecting its expression. It is evident that cyber bystanders can play a significant role in reducing cyberbullying. Although anti-bullying cyberbullying programs have begun to directly address cyber bystanders (Garandeau *et al.*, 2023; Salmivalli *et al.*, 2011; Torgal *et al.*, 2021;) they have not differentiated between constructive and aggressive defending. There has also been scant research addressing the sociocognitive mechanisms underlying any changes in defending behavior for those participating in the anti-bullying programs. There is a need for these programs to focus directly on cyber bystanders particularly passive bystanders who need to be informed not only about the importance of intervening safely in cyberbullying episodes, but also about how to respond constructively. Students have indicated that a lack of knowledge is the key reason for not intervening and remaining passive (Jackson *et al.*, 2024). It is therefore important that students are shown how to defend the victim in positive ways that do not involve aggressive or retaliatory reactions.

To improve the efficacy of anti-bullying intervention programs, the Social Cognitive Theory approach to cyber bystanders outlined in this paper could inform a more theoretically guided approach to bystanding to be included as part of a more comprehensive anti-bullying intervention. For example, it could provide information about the different bystander responses and seek to alter the sociocognitive processes of defending self-efficacy, empathic self-efficacy, and moral disengagement that have been associated with the regulation of defending behavior (Clark; Bussey, 2020; Sobol *et al.*, 2024). Bandura (1997, 2023) has provided clear guidelines for boosting self-efficacy and attenuating the use of moral disengagement. Such a program would extend beyond simply advocating for positive cyber bystander responses by providing training in empathizing with the victim, providing strategies for constructive defending, as well as challenging the excuses that are used by bystanders to reconstrue cyberbullying as acceptable (moral disengagement). A program incorporating these principles is currently being trialled by the authors as a standalone module. Ideally it would be included in a comprehensive whole of school anti-bullying program that addresses cyberbullying, cyber victimization, and cyber defending.

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