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Who's to blame?: The effects of victim disclosure on bystander reactions to cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Recent evidence suggests that bystanders are even less likely to intervene with online compared to offline bullying. Given that receiving social support following bullying can buffer victims from maladjustment, it is important to consider specific factors influencing bystanders' intention to intervene and help the victim in online contexts. The current experiment examined how cybervictims' disclosures (i.e., sharing personal information) on Facebook influence bystanders' attributions of blame, empathy, and intention to intervene on behalf of a victim following a cyberbullying incident. Participants ($N = 118$) were randomly assigned to view the Facebook profile of a cybervictim who posted an update ranging in personal disclosure (high vs. low) and valence (positive vs. negative). Results indicate that viewing the high disclosure profile (i.e., more personal post from victim), regardless of valence, caused participants to blame the victim more and feel less empathy for the victim, which in turn predicted lower likelihood of bystander intervention with the bullying incident. These results are discussed in terms of implications for encouraging positive bystander behavior in response to incidents of cyberbullying.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several years, Facebook has become the second most visited website in the United States, only behind Google. Despite reports of its recent declining popularity among younger generations (Piper Jaffray, 2014), Facebook remains the most widely used social media platform among young adults (Guimaraes, 2014; Harvard Institute of Politics, 2011). Although social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook offer opportunities for communication and connection with others, they also provide a new venue for negative social interactions. Cyberbullying, the use of online media to engage in intentional aggression characterized by a power imbalance, has become a growing problem among users (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Williams & Guerra, 2007). Although much research focuses on the cyberbullying experiences of children and adolescents, similar negative online experiences are also prevalent among young adults. In a study of undergraduate students, Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, and Reese (2012) found that almost one third of the sample were cyberbullied in the past six months and that over 30% experienced their first cyberbullying incident

during their college years. Taken together with evidence of high rates of social media usage among college-aged youth (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015), these findings suggest that further investigation of cyberbullying experiences on SNS among young adults is warranted.

Much like victims of traditional bullying, cybervictims suffer a range of negative psychological outcomes (e.g., depression; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). Bullying that occurs online, as opposed to in person, may be particularly harmful for victims, insofar as incidents typically occur in front of a wider audience. In turn, the reactions of online bystanders play an important role in shaping victim adjustment following cyberbullying incidents. Whereas victims experience heightened distress when bystanders do not intervene with bullying situations (Salmivalli, 2010), receiving support from on-lookers can significantly alleviate victims' plight (Pepler, Craig, & O'Connell, 2010). As such, it is critical to understand the conditions under which bystanders will show increased support for victims of cyberbullying.

2. Online bystanders: an attributional framework

Bystander intervention in bullying incidents both online (Huang & Chou, 2010) and offline (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001) is

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uncommon. Although the presence of many onlookers and options for more discreet intervention (e.g., sending victim private message of support) in online contexts suggest more opportunities for bystander intervention, research indicates that bystanders are significantly *less* likely to intervene with bullying incidents that occur online compared to in person (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013). Given that the likelihood of intervention decreases as number of bystanders increases (Fischer et al., 2011), the large size of online audiences may account for lower rates of intervention. Of particular concern, bystanders are not only unlikely to intervene on behalf of the victim online, but they are also significantly more likely to reinforce the cyberbully in online as compared to offline settings (Barlińska et al., 2013).

When might bystanders be more likely to intervene on behalf of victims of cyberbullying? That is, in an environment where a victim's 'audience' multiplies from 20 classmates to over 200 Facebook friends, what factors predict bystander support for victims? Although bystander behavior in traditional school contexts has been considered, less is known about the specific factors influencing bystander behavior online. Considering cyberbullying within an attributional framework can elucidate the specific cognitive and affective processes guiding online bystanders' intentions to intervene. Weiner's attribution theory posits that following a negative event, observers are likely to try to understand why it happened. Their causal inference (i.e., attribution), in turn, affects their emotional reaction. This cognitive–affective reaction then guides subsequent behavior (Weiner, 1995, 2006). For example, when determining whether to provide assistance to a person in need, individuals show the lowest rates of help-giving when they make internal and controllable attributions to the actor (e.g., he brought this on himself), whereas making uncontrollable attributions and feeling sympathy for the actor increases help-giving behavior (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004).

In offline bullying contexts, bystanders who empathize with the victim are more likely to intervene and provide support (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2008; Salmivalli, 2010). Although limited bullying research has examined how bystander attributions about the victim impact bystander behavior (e.g., Thornberg & Jungert, 2013), studies among victims of rape suggest that onlookers who blame the victim for his/her plight more commonly do nothing to help (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; McMahon, 2010). Similar processes may operate in online bullying contexts, such that higher levels of victim blame will come at the cost of decreased empathy, in turn reducing bystanders' sense of responsibility to support the victim (Runions & Bak, 2015).

Indeed, online bystanders frequently perceive victims as blameworthy. In one study of online bystander behavior, participants read a hypothetical cyberbullying scenario (i.e., embarrassing pictures circulated online) and described why they thought this happened. The majority of participants believed it was the victim's own fault. Specifically, almost one third of bystanders attributed the cyberbullying to internal, controllable victim characteristics (e.g., victim provoked the bully), as opposed to characteristics uncontrollable by the victim (e.g., unattractiveness; Holfeld, 2014). Another study of cyberbullying found that bystanders who viewed victims as responsible for their own plight were significantly less likely to offer social support (Weber, Ziegele, & Schnauber, 2013). Bystanders' emotional reactions to the victim may also factor into their behavioral decisions. Results from one study indicate that bystanders who were more upset by witnessing cyberbullying were also more likely to provide the victim subsequent support (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013). Taken together, these findings suggest that the degree to which bystanders a) blame victims for their plight and b) feel for the victim (i.e.,

empathize) impacts their intention to intervene and provide support for the victim.

Unique features of the online environment may also influence the aforementioned cognitive–affective processes in ways that differ from traditional offline bullying situations. For example, in school-based incidents bystanders are often small in number and privy to limited information regarding how the bullying incident unfolded. The incident is also temporally confined—after it occurs, bystanders may forget or distort details of the event. Additionally, those who did not directly witness the bullying can only access information about the incident through word of mouth. In contrast, cyberbullying incidents frequently occur on public SNS profiles, accessible to a very large number of peers and for an indefinite period of time (Runions & Bak, 2015). That is, harassing pictures and posts rarely disappear online. The wide audience of bystanders can then use concrete contextual cues, such as information available on a cybervictim's social media profile, to infer why the bullying occurred. For example, bystanders who perceive a victim's online behavior as provocative or socially inappropriate (e.g., sharing overly personal feelings) may display greater victim blame and less victim empathy, in turn reducing their likelihood of intervening (Weber et al., 2013).

3. Determinants of bystander cognitive–affective reactions: victim disclosure

To understand when and why bystanders intervene with cyberbullying, it is important to examine factors influencing bystanders' attributions of blame and empathy for a cybervictim. Yet, little research has considered how specific features of cyberbullying incidents impact bystanders' cognitive–affective processes. Studies of offline victimization, largely regarding sexual assaults or rape, suggest that onlookers who perceive victim behavior as inappropriate or provocative are more likely to blame and feel less empathy for the victim. For example, participants assigned less jail time to a male perpetrator in a hypothetical rape case when the victim was described as dressing in more revealing clothing (Kanekar & Kolsawalla, 1980). In one study considering attributions of blame in cyberbullying incidents, Weber et al. (2013) found that victims who disclosed more personal information (e.g., phone number, address) online were blamed more for being bullied, and these victims were in turn less likely to receive social support from bystanders. That is, bystanders' perceptions of victim responsibility were shaped by the content and perceived appropriateness of the victim's social media profile.

Although the literature concerning victim disclosure as it relates to bystander behavior is scarce, initial findings suggest that online disclosure among victims affects bystanders' perceptions of cyberbullying incidents. Thus far, researchers have focused on how the amount of objective personal information disclosed (e.g., phone number, email address; Taddicken, 2014; Weber et al., 2013) impacts bystander perceptions of victims. However, while sharing personal information through these personal profile details has become less common among young adult users on websites like Facebook, many continue to disclose personal experiences through posts or picture uploads on their own profiles (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014; Van Gool, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2015). On social media, highly personal disclosures and "oversharing" of personal information elicits negative judgments from others, insofar as these posts signal attention-seeking behavior (Forest & Wood, 2012; Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014).

4. Current study

Relying on an experimental design to examine bystanders' perceptions and reactions to cyberbullying incidents on Facebook, the goal of the present study was to consider how a cybervictim's online personal disclosures impact bystanders' attributions of blame and empathy for a cyberbullied teen, as well as their subsequent intention to intervene and support the victim. In addition to varying the level of the victim's disclosure (i.e., highly personal post vs. general post), we manipulated the valence (positive vs. negative) of the post. It was hypothesized that bystanders would perceive cybervictims who exhibit high disclosure behavior on Facebook as more deserving of the bullying (i.e., attribute more victim blame). That is, the victim's intimate disclosure may be viewed as highly personal and provocative, in turn facilitating bystanders' perceptions that the victim is at fault for the subsequent harassment. It was similarly expected that bystanders would have less empathy for the victim in the high disclosure condition where the post may be viewed as more attention-seeking.

We also consider the valence (positive vs. negative) of the victim's posts. Whereas negative (e.g., ruminating, complaining) posts may violate implicit disclosure norms, it is possible that positive (e.g., self-promoting) posts are perceived as bragging and equally inappropriate. Thus, it is not clear which type of post elicits more negative responses. Finally, we expected that bystanders' attributions of blame and empathy for the victim would relate to their intention to intervene and support the victim. Considering these intermediate cognitive–affective processes (i.e., attributions and empathy; Weiner, 2006), we tested two mediation models. Again, we hypothesized that high disclosure posts would predict more blaming the victim and less empathy for the victim. In turn, greater victim blame and less empathy were expected to predict less bystander support for the victim.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

A total of 118 young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.55$; 58% female) were recruited through a convenience sampling of Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers. Study eligibility criteria required all participants to speak English as their primary language and to live in the United States. The majority of participants (59%) were enrolled as full-time college students at the time of study. Most participants (74%) self-identified as White. All participants received \$0.50 for their participation in the study.

5.2. Materials and procedure

Participants who elected to participate were provided a link to the secure website containing the study. Those who were eligible were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions ranging in disclosure (high vs. low) and valence (positive vs. negative) and completed the experiment online.

All participants read a brief description stating that they would see a Facebook profile belonging to an 18-year old girl named Kate and were instructed to take a few moments to look over the profile. We depicted a female victim given evidence that girls are more likely to exhibit personal self-disclosures on social media (Davis, 2012). Hypothetical profiles were modeled after the layout of a

true Facebook profile (see Fig. 1) including Kate's name, photo and friends list.¹ The hypothetical profile contained three of Kate's posts, two of which were neutral (e.g., music video link; not included in figure) and consistent across all conditions to increase face validity of the stimuli. The content of the most recent post included the disclosure and valence manipulation as a between-subjects factor; all other profile content remained constant across conditions.

Table 1 presents the specific posts for each condition: Negative High Disclosure, Negative Low Disclosure, Positive High Disclosure, Positive Low Disclosure. Level of personal disclosure related to the degree of intimate and personal information expressed. In low disclosure conditions, the victim posted her feelings about a TV show, whereas in high disclosure conditions she posted her feelings about her romantic relationship. Positive valence was represented by the phrase, "I love it when..." whereas negative valence was represented by the phrase, "I hate it when..." For example, in the high disclosure and negative condition, Kate's most recent post reads, "I hate it when you miss someone like crazy and you think they might not miss you back ☹." The content of the four posts was matched across conditions to be comparable in length and structure.

To capture a typical cyberbullying incident, in all conditions Kate's most recent post included a mean comment from another female user, Sarah. The comment stated, "Who cares! This is why nobody likes you...". To represent the power imbalance that characterizes bullying incidents, the comment was "liked" six times, indicating that six other individuals had viewed and expressed support for the cyberbully's post. After viewing this hypothetical profile, participants completed all measures.

5.3. Dependent measures

Study measures assessed participants' reactions to the Facebook profile and cyberbullying incident. Participants were asked to imagine that Kate and Sarah were acquaintances (i.e., people they see and occasionally talk to). They were asked to imagine that they encountered the exchange between Kate and Sarah while on Facebook. Participants then responded to a series of questions related to their perceptions of and feelings about the postings.

5.3.1. Attributions of blame

Attributions of victim blame were evaluated with six items that asked participants the degree to which Kate was to blame for Sarah's comment (e.g., "Kate provoked Sarah's comment"; "Kate has herself to blame for Sarah's comment"). Participants were asked to indicate their responses on a 5-point scale, from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Items were summed and averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .89$).

5.3.2. Empathy

Empathy for the victim was measured through four items asking participants the extent to which they "felt" for Kate. Participants rated their agreement with the four statements on a 5-point scale, from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree" (5). Items were summed and averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .81$).

5.3.3. Intention to intervene

Intention to intervene and support the victim was evaluated with seven items. These items addressed both direct intervention through confrontation of the bully (e.g., "post a comment telling Sarah to stop being mean") and indirect intervention through support of the victim (e.g., "send Kate a private message to comfort/reassure her"). Participants were asked to indicate their responses on a 5-point scale, from "Definitely would not do this" (1) to

¹ To limit potential distracting information, all photos and last names on the profile were blurred. Study participants were informed that this was done for privacy purposes.

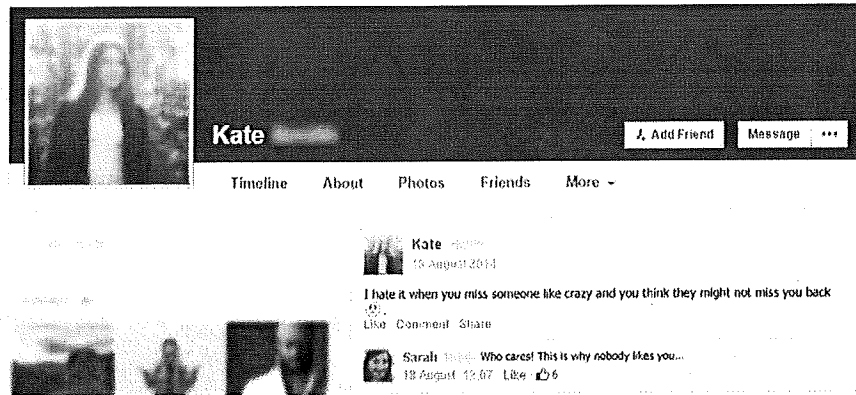


Fig. 1. Negative high disclosure condition profile.

Table 1
Victim's Facebook post by condition.

	Negative Valence	Positive Valence
Low Disclosure	"I hate it when a Game of Thrones episode ends and you have to wait a whole week to watch more ☹."	"I love it when a Game of Thrones episode ends and you can't wait until next week to watch more ☺."
High Disclosure	"I hate it when you miss someone like crazy and you think they might not miss you back ☹."	"I love it when you like someone like crazy and you think they might like you back ☺."

"Definitely would do this" (5). Items were summed and averaged to create a composite score ($\alpha = .82$).

6. Results

6.1. Descriptive analyses

The majority of participants (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Facebook incident qualified as "cyberbullying". Across conditions, participants reported relatively low levels of victim blame ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 0.81$) and high levels of empathy for the victim ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.80$). On average, participants reported moderate rates of intention to intervene and support the victim ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 0.88$).

6.2. Main analyses

The first goal of the study was to examine how level of disclosure and valence of a cybervictim's Facebook post affected bystanders' attributions of blame, level of empathy for the victim, and intention to intervene and support the victim. Three separate 2×2 analysis of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted to test the effects of personal disclosure (high vs. low) and valence (positive vs. negative) on the three outcomes. Results from the ANOVAs are presented in Table 2. Across all outcomes (victim blame, empathy, intention to intervene), there were no main effects of valence nor any interactions between disclosure and valence. For victim blame, there was a significant main effect of disclosure, such that participants were more likely to blame the victim (e.g., she had it coming) in the high disclosure ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 0.84$) compared to low disclosure ($M = 1.50$, $SD = 0.75$) condition. For empathy, there was also a significant main effect of disclosure, such that participants felt less empathy for the victim in the high disclosure ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.95$) compared to low disclosure ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.72$)

condition. There was no effect of disclosure on intention to intervene and support the victim. Thus, participants blamed Kate more and felt less empathy for her when she posted feelings about her relationship compared to when she posted feelings about a TV show. However, the experimental manipulation did not directly influence bystanders' willingness to support the victim following the cyberbullying incident.

In order to determine if post disclosure indirectly influences bystanders' intention to intervene, the second goal was to consider how bystander attributions of blame and empathy for the victim affect willingness to intervene and support the victim of cyberbullying. We expanded upon the previous ANOVAs to examine two mediation models testing the indirect effect of disclosure on intention to intervene through a) attributions of blame and b) empathy, while controlling for the valence (positive vs. negative) of posts (see Table 3).² These models were examined using the PROCESS macro in SPSS and following procedures outlined by Hayes (2012) to test indirect effects. We used a bootstrapping method that provides 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals of indirect effect estimates from 1000 total resamples of the data, such that confidence intervals not including zero indicate a significant indirect effect. As seen in Fig. 2, there were significant indirect effects of disclosure on intention to intervene through victim blame (Fig. 2a; indirect effect = -0.078 , 95% CI = -0.208 to -0.005) and empathy (Fig. 2b; indirect effect = -0.153 , 95% CI = -0.326 to -0.009). There were no total or direct effects of disclosure on intention to intervene. That is, although we did not find evidence of mediation, victim blame and empathy nevertheless function as important intervening variables.³ Participants who viewed a high disclosure post were more likely to blame the victim for the cyberbullying and feel less empathy for the victim, which in turn predicted lower likelihood of intervening on behalf of the victim.

To calculate effect sizes, we computed partially standardized indirect effects that indicate the expected change in our outcome for every one-unit increase in the independent variable (i.e., difference between high and low disclosure) indirectly via the intervening variable (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). For the model with victim blame as the intervening variable, the partially standardized effect was -0.081 (95% CI = -0.278 to -0.010). For the model with

² Given the strong negative correlation between victim blame and empathy, all analyses are run separately for the two different outcomes.

³ Even in the absence of a significant total effect, it is important to interpret the underlying processes indicated by a significant indirect effect (Hayes, 2009; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002; Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011).

Table 2

Two-way analysis of variance tests of disclosure and valence effects on victim blame, empathy, and intention to intervene.

Source	Levene's test F value	SS	Df	MS	F value	Partial η^2
Victim blame	0.677					
Disclosure		3.526	1	3.526	5.564*	0.047
Valence		1.015	1	1.015	1.601	0.014
Disclosure $\times$ Valence		0.323	1	0.323	0.510	0.004
Empathy	1.145					
Disclosure		2.700	1	2.700	4.262*	0.036
Valence		0.022	1	0.022	0.035	0.000
Disclosure $\times$ Valence		0.035	1	0.035	0.056	0.000
Intention to intervene	1.006					
Disclosure		1.180	1	1.180	1.542	0.013
Valence		2.810	1	2.810	3.671	0.031
Disclosure $\times$ Valence		0.347	1	0.347	0.453	0.004

Note. DV = dependent variable. * $p < .05$.

All Levene tests (for homogeneity of variance) were non-significant, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not violated.

empathy as the intervening variable, the partially standardized effect was -0.176 (95% CI = -0.381 to -0.024).

7. Discussion

Past research has identified bystanders as important actors in bullying incidents (Salmivalli, 2010). They can worsen victim plight by not intervening or alleviate victim distress by supporting the victim (Pepler et al., 2010). Yet, relatively little is known about when and why bystanders intervene. The current study addressed this question by considering how bystanders' attributions and emotional reactions to a cyberbullied teen vary depending on the victim's degree of personal disclosure on Facebook. Bystanders attributed greater blame to and were less empathic towards victims who disclosed highly personal information, regardless of whether the disclosure was negative or positive. Greater victim blame and lower empathy for the victim were in turn related to less positive bystander behavior (i.e., lower likelihood of supporting the victim).

Our results suggest that bystander reactions to cyberbullying are not only impacted by individual characteristics identified in past research (e.g., self-efficacy for defending; Pöyhönen, Juvonen, & Salmivalli, 2012) but also by bystander perceptions of the victim's behavior within the online context. Victims who disclosed personal information about their social relationships, as opposed to more

generic commentary about a TV show, were viewed as more deserving of the bullying. These findings extend past research showing that bystanders react negatively to victims who post more personal information (i.e., phone number, location) on Facebook (Weber et al., 2013). Bystanders may interpret highly personal posting by the victim as violating disclosure norms or "netiquette" (Vitak, 2012). In contrast, posts about a popular TV show may fit more within the realm of typical and acceptable Facebook etiquette. As such, harassment in response to the low disclosure posts is seen as more unwarranted. It is similarly possible that bystanders use cues from the victim's post to make broader judgments about the victim's personality, in turn impacting their attributions of blame and level of empathy. For example, past research has indicated that users who disclose more personal information online tend to report lower self-esteem (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009) and greater narcissism (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008). In the current study, participants may have come to view the victim's high disclosure behavior as indicative of other undesirable traits (e.g., neediness), thus increasing victim blame and decreasing empathy.

As self-disclosure on social networking sites like Facebook becomes increasingly common among younger users, it is important to understand potential risks of sharing personal information and feelings (Van Gool et al., 2015). Given that online interactions lack the same verbal and contextual cues available in face-to-face exchanges, increased disinhibition can help account for online aggression (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). Extending such analyses further in the current study, we demonstrate how self-disclosure among victims negatively impacts bystanders' reactions to a cyberbullying incident. Because bystanders have limited information about the interaction (e.g., cannot see victim's emotional reaction to bullying), their responses are largely based on information available on the victim's Facebook post. Whereas offline bullying can entail greater ambiguity as to what provoked the incident, online bystanders are likely to use the victim's most recent behavior (i.e., Facebook posting) to make conclusions about the incident. In this sense, the minimal information available to bystanders of cyberbullying incidents online also constrains the number of accessible attributions for the incident.

We found no evidence for effects of post valence, nor interactions between disclosure and valence, on bystander perceptions of the victim. Whereas negative disclosure of personal information may signal social desperation or excessive reassurance seeking (Forest & Wood, 2012; Gilbert & Horenstein, 1975), positive personal disclosures may elicit equally negative responses from bystanders insofar as they indicate narcissistic or attention-seeking behavior (Carpenter, 2012; DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser, & Campbell, 2011). In addition to studying issues concerning online netiquette

Table 3

Regression models predicting victim blame, empathy, and intention to intervene.

Predictors	<i>b</i>	SE
a) Victim blame		
<i>Mediator variable model (DV = victim blame)</i>		
Constant	1.599***	0.13
Disclosure	0.344*	0.15
Valence	-0.188	0.15
<i>Dependent variable model (DV = intention to intervene)</i>		
Constant	3.164***	0.22
Disclosure	-0.099	0.16
Valence	-0.332	0.16
Victim Blame	-0.226*	0.10
b) Empathy		
<i>Mediator variable model (DV = empathy)</i>		
Constant	4.231***	0.13
Disclosure	-0.306*	0.15
Valence	-0.028	0.15
<i>Dependent variable model (DV = intention to intervene)</i>		
Constant	0.687	0.41
Disclosure	-0.023	0.15
Valence	-0.275	0.14
Empathy	0.500***	0.09

Note. DV = dependent variable, SE = standard error. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

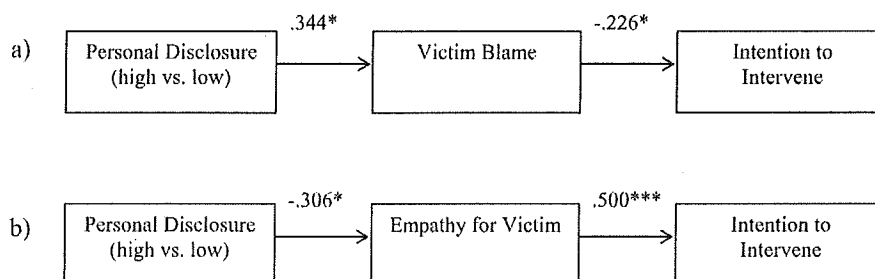


Fig. 2. Indirect effects of post disclosure on intention to intervene through victim blame (a) and empathy (b). Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

(McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Park, Na, & Kim, 2014), the effects of specific types of emotion disclosures on social networking sites should be further examined in future research.

The current study also offers new insight into the potential cognitive–affective processes preceding bystander intervention. Although our analyses indicated that neither level of disclosure nor valence of the post directly affected bystanders' intentions to support the victim, there were indirect effects of disclosure on intention to intervene through victim blame and empathy for the victim. Cognitive–affective processes related to help-giving that unfold in offline domains (e.g., Weiner, 2006) appear to also be at play within online contexts and in relation to bullying incidents. In addition, the current findings are consistent with research in offline domains demonstrating that in order to feel a responsibility to intervene and help a victim, bystanders must feel for the victim and view the harassment as out of the victim's own control (Barlińska et al., 2013; Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Nickerson, Mele, & Princiotta, 2008). Our findings also corroborate results from Weber et al. (2013), who found support for a similar model of bystander responses to cyberbullying.

7.1. Limitations and conclusion

Here we relied exclusively on hypothetical scenarios of cyberbullying. Although the profiles were created to closely mimic true Facebook profiles, cyberbullying incidents are typically experienced and perceived within existing social networks. We instructed participants to imagine that both the victim and bully were social acquaintances, but nonetheless we are unable to capture some of the real-life features of cyberbullying incidents that surely impact bystander reactions (e.g., social status of the victim, relationship with bully etc.). Effect sizes in the current study were small, perhaps because participants' reactions to complete strangers capture substantial individual differences. Future research should examine similar processes based on young adults' true experiences with cyberbullying. Similarly, given that we ask participants about their intention to intervene, experimental methods should also be used to measure actual intervention behaviors and minimize discrepancies between intentions and behavior. Finally, we focused on a female victim because girls are more likely to exhibit intimate self-disclosures on social media (Davis, 2012) and often report higher levels of cyberbullying than boys (Smith et al., 2008). However, we do not know if similar processes would characterize bystander responses to a male victim or bully.

Although we observed the negative impact of victims' online disclosures on bystander perceptions, sharing intimate information online does not always predict negative outcomes. Using online communication to engage in disclosure behaviors can actually promote identity development among young adults (Jordan-Conde, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2014). In certain contexts, online disclosure allows for individuals to communicate with similar others

within the privacy and safety of a shared space (e.g., Tumblr community pages for individuals with stigmatized identities). Studies have also shown that increased disclosure in more personal online contexts, such as one-on-one messaging, facilitates friendship formation among introverted adolescents (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Similarly, increased intimate disclosures between friends online can strengthen pre-existing relationships (Davis, 2012). In this sense, it is possible that highly personal online disclosures put young adults at risk among audiences of acquaintances or strangers, as in the current study, whereas personal disclosures offer unique benefits within the confines of closer relationships. Thus, just like in offline contexts, users on social media need to be careful when, where, and to whom they disclose.

In the current study, the content of the victim's post affected bystanders' reactions; however, this is not to say that the onus is exclusively on victims to monitor their disclosure behaviors on Facebook. Rather, we emphasize that targeting bystanders' perceptions and interpretations of victims' conduct online offers a potential avenue for increasing positive bystander behavior in online contexts. One promising intervention direction involves increasing positive bystander behavior through perspective-taking and empathy training (Salmivalli, 2014). Programs that increase bystanders' awareness of their role in bullying situations, particularly in online contexts where intervention is all the more unlikely, will be a critical next step for promoting victim well being.

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