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Bystanders' Attributions of Gender-Based Cyberbullying: The Role of Bystander, Victim, and Transgressor Gender

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Abstract

Bystanders can help stop cyberbullying, but before they can respond to victimization, they must assess why the victimization occurs. Drawing on Attribution Theory, the current study assessed young adults' attributions concerning cyberbullying. It was expected that bystanders would be more likely to use internal than external attributions when assessing gender-based cyberbullying. Based on the Social Reasoning Developmental Model, it was also expected that gender group membership of the bystander, victim, and transgressor would play a role in the use of different attributions. 387 young adults (M_{age} = 19.05, SD = 1.35) from a U.S. university completed a survey where they were randomly assigned to scenarios depicting gender-based cyberbullying. Participants then provided written explanations as to why they believed the victimization occurred. A codebook was created and responses were coded using Thematic Analysis and analyzed using a 2 (Transgressor Gender) × 2 (Victim Gender) × 2 (Participant Gender) × 5 (Attribution: Discomfort, Jealousy, Insecurity, Gender Identity, External) mixed-model MANOVA. Findings indicate that participants largely attributed cyberbullying to certain internal causes (i.e., insecurity, gender) rather than external causes or other internal causes. The gender of the participant, the victim, and the transgressor also mattered. Participants attributed insecurity more frequently in same-gender cyberbullying and gender more often when a female transgressor targeted a male victim. Findings highlight the importance of group membership and internal attributions in shaping bystanders reasoning. The current study underscores the need for interventions addressing bystander misattributions in order to promoter more effective bystander responses.

Keywords: online; attribution theory; social domain theory; witness; male; female; gender

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Introduction

A major problem facing people today is cyberbullying, which has been acknowledged as a high priority issue around the globe (Slanbekova et al., 2024). As people increasingly use online spaces, the risk of being exposed to cyberbullying also increases (Chan, 2024). Although all forms of cyberbullying are harmful, one particularly prevalent form of cyberbullying is gender-based cyberbullying, defined as repeated and harmful behavior targeting a victim online, whom the transgressor perceives as holding less power than themselves, related to their actual or perceived gender identity or expression (Andrews et al., 2018; Menesini et al., 2012). The global rate of

online gender-based victimization is approximately 70.8% (Monteiro et al., 2024). Regardless of gender, the consequences of gender-based victimization are severe, impacting mental health, social relationships, and even educational outcomes (Geppert et al., 2024; Opanasenko et al., 2021).

One way to decrease victimization is by utilizing bystanders, those who witness victimization, bullying, or other similar behaviors or events (Kumar, 2025). Despite research documenting how effective bystanders can be at discontinuing victimization when they do intervene, they regularly fail to do so (Blackwell et al., 2017; Flynn et al., 2025). Often, research in this space engages with what actions bystanders are willing to take in response to victimization or how acceptable they perceive the victimization to be (Amar et al., 2014; Herry et al., 2021; Herry & Mulvey, 2023). Yet, this work frequently fails to engage with why bystanders believe that the victimization occurred in the first place, an important aspect of Latane and Darley (1970)'s conceptualization of the active bystander, bystanders must interpret a situation as harmful before they can offer assistance. In particular, it may be that bystanders misattribute the cause of the bullying, leading to a lack of personal responsibility or action on their part. However, only limited research has attended to bystanders' attributions of bullying (Francisco et al., 2022; Mulvey et al., 2024; Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023), with no research that we are aware of examining bystanders' attributions for gender-based cyberbullying. Thus, the current study aims to identify why bystanders believe gender-based cyberbullying occurs and how their own gender, the gender of the victim, and the gender of the cyberbully may be associated with these attributions.

Theoretical Framework

Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986) and the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (Rutland et al., 2010; Rutland & Killen, 2015) inform the current study. Attribution Theory addresses how people make inferences about the cause of their own or others' behaviors. One of the primary tenants of Attribution Theory focuses on understanding in what context a behavior is attributed to external causes, such as due to something specific about the social environment or context in which the situation occurs, or internal causes, such as traits of the individuals who are engaged in the situation (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986). Although Attribution Theory addresses internal and external attributions (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986), research indicates that individuals often attribute other people's negative and positive behaviors to internal causes, such as an identity they hold (e.g., their gender) or their general disposition (e.g., a rude person; Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023), whereas they attribute their own negative behaviors to external causes (e.g., they were late because of traffic) and their positive behaviors to internal causes (e.g., a nice person). Attribution Theory informs the current research as we examine why participants believe gender-based cyberbullying occurs, and what types of attributions (i.e., internal or external) bystanders make about gender-based cyberbullying.

The Social Reasoning Developmental Model addresses how people balance social-conventional norms (e.g., gender expression), their own identities (e.g., group identity) and their morality (e.g., beliefs about what is right or wrong) when they decide how they might respond to socially and/or morally complex situations (Killen et al., 2013; Rutland & Killen, 2015). One study that included bystanders' assessment of unfair behavior within STEM contexts utilizing the Social Reasoning Developmental Model found that across scenarios, bystanders were more likely to attribute internal attributions than external attributions as the cause of unfair behavior, and there were also differences in the use of attributions based on gender group membership (Mulvey et al., 2024). The Social Reasoning Developmental Model informs the current research as we expect that the bystander's gender group membership, specifically, whether their own gender identity aligns with the gender of the victim and/or transgressor plays a significant role in the types of attributions they make about the gender-based cyberbullying.

Gender-Based Cyberbullying

Identity-based victimization, or victimization directed toward someone because of their membership in a specific identity group, can take on many different forms, including gender-based cyberbullying (Herry & Mulvey, 2023). Online gender-based victimization is widespread, with 31.7–84% of women and 4.3–68.6% of men reporting experiencing this form of victimization (Martínez-Bacaico et al., 2024a; Salerno-Ferraro et al., 2022; Vogels, 2021). Not only is online gender-based victimization widespread, but it also has a detrimental impact on the health and well-being of those who are targeted. For example, one study documented that online gender-related victimization was associated with lower self-rated health, lower quality of life, lower self-esteem, greater psychosomatic symptoms, more depressive symptoms, and more self-harm behavior (Svensson et al., 2025). Consequently,

finding effective methods for discontinuing such victimization is of global concern (Slanbekova et al., 2024). One promising method of discontinuing gender-based cyberbullying is through bystander intervention.

Researchers have aimed to identify methods for discontinuing instances of gender-based victimization online and offline. Historically, online intervention research has largely focused on the perpetrator and victim, rather than others who may be present when victimization occurs (Gaffney et al., 2019; Mulla et al., 2022). Yet, in more recent years, researchers have increasingly attended to the role that bystanders may play in these situations. Oftentimes, gender-based cyberbullying occurs in front of large audiences. From YouTube video comment sections (Döring & Mohseni, 2020), to posting harmful content about someone related to their gender or other social identities on social media platforms (Lazarus et al., 2022; Yu & Chen, 2024), gender-based online harassment often has dozens, if not hundreds or thousands of witnesses. The individuals who witness victimization have the potential to intervene, such as through providing emotional support or empowerment to the victim after the victimization happens, or even playing a role in discontinuing the perpetrator's harmful behavior as it occurs (Park et al., 2024).

Bystander Behavior

Bystander intervention, when a person either placing themselves into a situation to discontinue the problematic behavior or support the victim (Latane & Darley, 1970), is an effective strategy to reduce gender-based victimization (Salmivalli et al., 2011; Sundstrom et al., 2018). Observational research found that when bystanders intervene in aggressive situations, de-escalation is more likely to occur (Philpot et al., 2020). One qualitative study asking survivors of sexual violence about their perspectives on bystander intervention found that intervention strategies related to providing support for the victims may be especially effective (McMahon, 2024). When bystanders support the victim, whether through confronting the transgressor, comforting the victim, or other methods, they act as a buffer against negative health outcomes (Hill et al., 2022; Shea et al., 2021). However, despite the effectiveness of bystander intervention, bystanders often remain passive observers of victimization (Staub, 2023). When bystanders remain passive, or when they reinforce the transgressor's behaviors, both victims and bystanders experience negative emotional and mental health outcomes (DeSmet et al., 2019; Jeyagobi et al., 2022).

Thus, bystanders play a key role in the process of victimization, as well as in the outcomes following instances of victimization. Yet, bystanders often do not respond in ways that supports victims. Bystanders remaining passive when witnessing victimization or responding in ways that support the transgressor may be due factors such as the location that the victimization occurs. In particular, bystanders willingness to intervene may be limited online. Factors such as anonymity of all involved, lack of familiarity with the transgressor and/or the victim, and the potential for hundreds, if not thousands of other witnesses may reduce the likelihood that bystanders feel responsible for intervening (Kumar, 2025). Further, bystanders may be less likely to support victims of gender-based cyberbullying if they fear retaliation (Herry et al., 2021), if they devalue the identity of the victim (Staub, 2023), or if they misattribute the cause of the victimization (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023).

Attributions

Misattributions may be especially important to consider in the bystander intervention process as seminal research on bystander behavior suggests that bystander must *interpret* the situation as harmful prior to offering assistance (Latane & Darley, 1970). The interpretation process is important, as bystanders will be unlikely to intervene if they do not interpret the victimization as harmful and feel responsible for putting a stop to it. One study found that bystanders who dismiss bullying behavior may have attributed the situation as "normal conflict" rather than a serious issue (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Alternatively, the bystanders may have attributed the bullying to an internal issue with the victim that makes them deserving of being targeted (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Other work documented that bystanders will often downplay the seriousness of a situation as a form of moral disengagement (Francisco et al., 2022). When bystanders view victimization behavior as normative or unserious, they are more likely to dismiss or even reinforce harmful behavior both online and offline (Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016). Conversely, when bystanders view helping behavior as normative, they are more likely to help victims of cyberbullying (Chang et al., 2025; Leung, 2021). Taken together, this research suggests that attributions may play an important role in the interpretation step of the bystander intervention process, which can then lead to active intervention efforts.

Predictors of Bystander Attributions

Gender of the Participant, Victim, and Transgressor

Gender is one of the most salient identities that people hold, with membership in a particular gender group associated with a number of beliefs and behaviors, including related to expected bystander behavior online (Herry & Mulvey, 2023). Thus, the gender of a bystander may shape the formation of bystander attributions. In particular, gender may be important to consider when examining bystander attributions in relation to social norms, as gender ingroups have been shown to differ in their beliefs about bystander action or inaction (Stanciu & Chis, 2021). Women and girls tend to rate victimization as more severe, and they are also more likely to expect that they themselves will intervene compared to men and boys (Amar et al., 2014; Herry et al., 2021; Herry & Mulvey, 2023). Additionally, cisgender men have been found to hold significantly more positive views of cyberbullying and sexual harassment than cisgender women or transgender adults (Mussap et al., 2023). Cisgender boys and men are also more likely to remain passive and morally disengage from gender-based victimization (Machackova et al., 2018; Martínez-Bacaicoa et al., 2024b; Wang & Kim, 2024). Beyond remaining passive, men are more likely to reinforce victimization by laughing, cheering, or even joining in (Herry & Mulvey, 2023; van Baak et al., 2024). Limited prior research documents gender differences in bystanders' attributions, including that girls attribute the cause of unfair treatment of others by peers to general dislike, an internal attribution, significantly more often than boys (Mulvey et al., 2024). However, this same study found no gender differences in attributions when the transgressor was a teacher (Mulvey et al., 2024). The findings from this study suggests that it may be important to consider the identity of the transgressor when assessing attributions of unfair behavior.

The genders of the victim and transgressor as well as how they interact may also be important to consider when examining bystanders' attributions concerning gender-based cyberbullying. Research indicates that bystanders reason about the acceptability of gender-based exclusion and cyberbullying differently when the victim is a woman or girl compared to when the victim is a man or boy (Herry et al., 2023). This research found that participants thought the exclusion of women was less acceptable than the exclusion of men. Other research indicates that bystanders perceive victimization by a male transgressor as more severe than victimization perpetrated by a female transgressor (Harris & Knight-Bohnhoff, 1996). Bystanders are also more likely to expect that they will intervene in response to a male transgressor as compared to when there is a female transgressor (Herry & Mulvey, 2023). Further, prior work documents that bystanders are more likely to morally disengage from online gender-based victimization when the transgressor is a woman and the victim is a man compared to other gender combinations (Martínez-Bacaicoa et al., 2024b). Altogether, this research emphasizes the importance of considering the gender of all involved when examining the attributions that bystanders make in response to gender-based cyberbullying.

Current Study

As interpretation is an important step in becoming an active bystander (Latane & Darley, 1970), one way to counter bystander passivity is to address potential misattributions of victimization. However, research on how bystanders attribute the cause of victimization is limited (Francisco et al., 2022; Mulvey et al., 2024; Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Similarly, little research has considered the gender of all involved in the bystander intervention process within online contexts (Herry & Mulvey, 2023; Martínez-Bacaicoa et al., 2024b). Thus, the current study utilizes Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986) and the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al., 2010) to expand upon this previous literature, examining how bystanders attribute the cause of gender-based cyberbullying, considering the gender of the transgressor, the victim, and the bystander.

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that participants' attributions of why gender-based cyberbullying occurred would vary based on their own gender as well as the genders of the transgressor and the victim. We expected that bystanders would be more likely to use internal attributions compared to external attributions when assessing why gender-based cyberbullying occurred. Given that no other research has probed specific attributions within internal and external

attribution related to gender-based cyberbullying, we did not have specific expectations for the types of internal or external attributions that participants would make.

Methods

Participants

The present study utilizes data from a larger project examining bystander responses to gender-based cyberbullying collected during the Fall of 2020 at a public university in the southeastern United States of America. The full sample included 393 adults. The analytical sample for this study included all participants who responded to the optional questions related to why they believed the gender-based cyberbullying occurred, who disclosed their gender identity, and who identified as a woman or a man (n = 387, M_{age} = 19.05, SD = 1.35, range = 18 to 34, 49.1% women, 50.9% men). Participants who identified outside of the gender binary (n = 2), who did not respond to either of the open-ended attribution questions (n = 1), or who did not disclose their gender identity (n = 3) were excluded from analyses. The decision to exclude nonbinary participants was based on a requirement by the university's Institutional Review Board, as the number of participants who held nonbinary identities was too small, potentially impacting our ability to maintain confidentiality for those individuals. Additionally, those who did not disclose their gender identity or who did not answer at least one of the attribution questions were excluded as the missing information was necessary for conducting the current study's analyses. Potential participants had to be at least 18 years old and currently enrolled at the university. The racial identities of the analytic sample are as follows: 70.8% White or European American (n = 274); 14.2% Asian or Asian American (n = 55); 5.4% Black or African American (n = 21); 4.4% Hispanic or Latino/a/e/x (n = 17); 4.1% Bi- or Multi-racial (n = 16); and 1% identified as racial or ethnic identities that were not listed (n = 4). For additional information about the project and how participants expected to respond to gender-based cyberbullying as bystanders, see Herry and Mulvey, 2023.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in the Fall of 2020. All students over the age of 18 who self-enrolled in the Psychology Research Pool had an equal opportunity to participate in the study. Participants received course credit for participating in the larger 30 to 45-minute online Qualtrics study. Potential participants were informed that their individual-level data would be de-identified and not shared outside of the research team, and only data from all participants combined would be shared with others. They were also informed that their de-identified data would be stored for future research if they consented to participate and completed the study. Potential participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time for any reason, and that their data would be discarded if they chose to withdraw. Participants read two stories concerning gender-based cyberbullying. Participants then responded to an open-ended question regarding why they believed gender-based cyberbullying occurred for each scenario they read. In the larger study, participants answered additional questions related to their perspective as bystanders, see Herry and Mulvey, 2023, for more information.

Measure

Attributions of Gender-Based Cyberbullying

The stories presented to participants were modified from prior research assessing offline forms of bullying (Mulvey & Killen, 2016). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, either with a male or female transgressor, and they read two short scenarios related to gender-based cyberbullying, one scenario with a male victim and the other with a female victim. For example, if a participant was assigned to the "Male Transgressor" condition, they would read two stories, one where the male transgressor targeted a female victim, and one where the male transgressor targeted a male victim, see Table 1 for all four scenarios. By varying gender of all involved, the design allowed us to examine effects driven by the gender of the transgressor, the victim, and the bystander separately and together. The scenarios depict gender-based cyberbullying, as they describe repeated negative behavior by one individual against another person, based on their gender. Following each scenario, participants were presented with an open-ended attribution question, "*Why do you think [transgressor] often tells jokes and makes comments about [victim's] gender online?*"

Table 1. *Scenarios for Each Gender-Based Cyberbullying Condition.*

Victim	Transgressor	
	Female Transgressor	Male Transgressor
Male Victim	A boy your age named Chris, who you know from school, often makes public posts on popular social media websites. A girl your age, Amber, who you also know from school, often tells jokes and makes comments about Chris' gender online.	A boy your age named Chris, who you know from school, often makes public posts on popular social media websites. A boy your age, Tyler, who you also know from school, often tells jokes and makes comments about Chris' gender online.
Female Victim	A girl your age named Brittany, who you know from school, often makes public posts on popular social media websites. A girl your age, Rebecca, who you also know from school, often tells jokes and makes comments about Brittany's gender online.	A girl your age named Brittany, who you know from school, often makes public posts on popular social media websites. A boy your age, Tristan, who you also know from school, often tells jokes and makes comments about Brittany's gender online.

Note. Participants were randomly assigned to the Female Transgressor or Male Transgressor condition and were randomly presented with one story with a male victim, and another story with a female victim.

Data Coding and Analysis

Qualitative

The current study utilized Thematic Analysis throughout the process of identifying themes, developing the codebook, coding the responses, and interpreting the findings. The current study utilized Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This framework includes 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) generating an initial draft of a codebook, 3) searching for themes in the data, 4) reviewing the identified themes, 5) defining and naming the themes, and 6) writing up the findings (Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2024). Thematic Analysis is used to identify, analyze and interpret common themes across people, such as why bystanders believe gender-based cyberbullying occurs. Thematic Analysis was used in the current study due to its flexibility and ability to highlight similarities and differences across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic Analysis is often used when considering issues around identity broadly, as well as gender specifically (McAuliffe et al., 2023). Thematic Analysis was used as the framework for engaging with the data, whereas Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986) and the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al., 2010) were used to form a theoretical basis for the creation of the codebook and how participant responses were coded. Participants' attributions related to why they believed the gender-based cyberbullying occurred were manually coded using the previously described approach, led by the first author.

The codebook consisted of two overarching categories 1) Internal or Dispositional Attributions and 2) External or Situational Attributions. Each category contained additional subcodes (see Table 2). Following the creation of the codebook, two coders coded the same 25% of the total responses ($n_{\text{participants}} = 98$; $n_{\text{responses}} = 196$). The coders met with the first author to check their interrater reliability, to confirm that codes were being applied to participant responses similarly. The interrater reliability was excellent, Cohen's $\kappa = .98$. Following this check, the two coders completed coding the rest of the responses. When an attribution was identified in a response, it was manually coded as 1 if it was the only attribution identified. If two attributions were identified in a response, each attribution was manually coded as 0.5.

Quantitative

All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 29.0.0.0 (IBM Corp, 2018). For quantitative analyses, qualitative codes were transformed so that 0 = code was not referenced, and 1 = code was referenced. Quantitative analyses were conducted with subcategories if across the whole analytic sample, they were used above the frequency threshold of 10%, as recommended for open-ended data coded utilizing Social Reasoning Developmental Model approaches (Herry et al., 2023; Killen et al., 2013). Setting pragmatic inclusion criteria helps to ensure that only codes with sufficient prevalence are considered in statistical analyses. Limiting inclusion of data to that which meets this threshold ensures that findings are not driven by a small number of cases that may not be reflective of the sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). Following the qualitative coding and manual analysis of open-ended responses, quantitative data analyses were conducted.

Table 2. *Percent of Analytic Sample That Utilized Each Attribution and Definitions.*

	Percent (#)	Definitions
Internal Attributions		Bystanders believed that Gender-Based Cyberbullying occurred because of traits, characteristics, or emotions of the transgressor and/or the victim.
Discomfort (0-1)	14.4% (110)	Transgressor felt unease, discomfort, or distress with the victim.
Jealousy (0-1)	11.8% (90)	Transgressor felt jealous or envious of the victim, including of their status, relationships, or other qualities.
Insecurity (0-1)	33.5% (256)	Transgressor felt insecure, inadequate, or had low self-esteem, and was taking it out on the victim.
Gender Identity (0-1)	21.1% (161)	Transgressor and/or victim was confused or struggling with their gender identity, or because the victim expressed their gender identity in a way that the transgressor perceived as atypical or outside of the norm.
Sexuality (0-1)	1.2% (9)	Transgressor and/or victim was confused or struggling with their sexuality, or because the victim expressed their sexuality in a way that the transgressor perceived as atypical.
Immaturity (0-1)	3.0% (23)	Transgressor was emotionally or psychologically immature.
Empathy (0-1)	0.4% (3)	Transgressor lacked empathy for the victim and/or was unable to understand the emotional impact that they could have on others.
Closemindedness (0-1)	3.0% (23)	Transgressor held rigid or intolerant beliefs about gender identity or roles.
Social Status (0-1)	2.1% (16)	Transgressor wanted to maintain or promote their own social status among their online peers.
Bully (0-1)	4.8% (37)	Transgressor was generally a bully, or that the transgressor had a tendency to engage in bullying or harassing behaviors beyond the specific instance.
Prejudice (0-1)	0.8% (6)	Transgressor held bias or discriminatory attitudes related to gender or sexuality more broadly.
Lack of Knowledge (0-1)	5.4% (41)	Transgressor was ignorant or misinformed related to gender identities, sexualities, or gender issues.
Ability (0-1)	0.4 (3)	Transgressor simply was able to cyberbully the victim, so they did.
Interpersonal Relationship (0-1)	4.1% (31)	Transgressor and victim already had an established relationship of some kind.
Attention Seeking (0-1)	4.8% (37)	Transgressor and/or victim was seeking recognition, approval, or a reaction out of others.
Feelings (0-1)	0.3% (2)	Transgressor and/or the victim was seeking to impact the emotional state of the other
Other Internal (0-1)	0.0% (0)	Any additional internal explanations as to why Gender-Based Cyberbullying occurred.
Overall Internal (0-1)	87.6% (669)	Total percent of responses that utilized internal attributions.
External Attributions		Situational or environmental factors as the cause of the Gender-Based Cyberbullying.
Online Environment (0-1)	5.2% (40)	Aspects of the online environment itself, such as anonymity, lack of consequences, or online social norms.
Social Environment (0-1)	2.5% (19)	Aspects of the social environment including societal or ingroup influences such as cultural norms, gender stereotypes, or identity-group dynamics.
Other External (0-1)	1.8% (14)	Any additional situational or environmental explanation for why Gender-Based Cyberbullying occurred that were not included above.
Overall External Causes	9.6% (73)	Total percent of responses that utilized external attributions.
Other Codes		Responses that do not fit within the attribution framework.
Salience (0-1)	2.2% (17)	Responses refer to the salience of the situation, or not having enough information to make an informed assessment of the Gender-Based Cyberbullying.
Other (0-1)	1.0% (8)	Expected that the Gender-Based Cyberbullying occurred for a reason that does not fit within the attribution framework.
Uncodeable (0-1)	1.0% (8)	Participants' responses were uncodeable, such as participants saying "I don't know."
Overall Other	4.3% (33)	Total percent of analytic sample that utilized other codes.

Note. # = number of responses that utilized the given code.

First, correlations for the attributions occurring above 10% of the time were computed to identify if attributions were significantly correlated (Table 3). Then, a 2 (Transgressor Condition: Male transgressor, Female transgressor) × 2 (Victim Condition: Male victim, Female victim) × 2 (Participant Gender: Male, Female) × 5 (Attribution Type: Discomfort, Jealousy, Insecurity, Gender Identity, External) mixed-model multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in prevalence of attributions for gender-based cyberbullying. Transgressor condition and participant gender were included as between-subjects factors. Victim condition was

treated as a within-subjects factor. Means and standard deviations in each table were pulled from the descriptive statistics calculated at the same time as the MANOVA. Following the MANOVA, Bonferroni post-hoc tests were conducted on significant multivariate effects to identify significant group differences across attribution types.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Gender-Based Cyberbullying Attributions Used in the MANOVA and Pairwise Comparisons of Attribution Use.*

Attributions	Mean (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Discomfort (0-1)	.14 (.35)^{a,b,c}	—				
2. Jealousy (0-1)	.12 (.32)^{d,e}	−.05	—			
3. Insecurity (0-1)	.34 (.47)^{a,d,f,g}	−.13***	−.12***	—		
4. Gender Identity (0-1)	.21 (.41)^{b,e,f,h}	−.19***	−.19***	−.12***	—	
5. External Causes (0-1)	.10 (.29)^{c,g,h}	−.07*	−.05	−.06	−.04	—

Note. Pairs marked with the same superscript are significantly different; $^{a, d, e, f, g, h}p < .001$; $^{b,c}p < .05$. The following indicate the significance level of the correlations: $^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$.

Results

Qualitative

Internal attributions were present in 87.6% of responses, whereas external attributions were present in 9.6%. For additional information about how each code was defined and utilized, see Table 2. Four internal attributions met the 10% threshold requirement, insecurity, gender identity, discomfort, and jealousy. See Table 4 for example responses representative of attributions that met the 10% threshold, by condition. A reference to insecurity was found in 33.5% of responses. While insecurity could be applied to the victim and/or the transgressor, participants typically indicated that the transgressor was insecure about themselves in some respect, and they chose to take that insecurity out on the victim. Insecurity was often double coded with other codes, especially gender identity. A reference to gender identity was found in 21.1% of responses. This is unsurprising given that the situations were related to gender. Unlike many of the other attributions, where participants referenced the attributions to the transgressor only, when participants referenced gender identity, they often referenced both the victim and transgressor. Of the 21.1% of responses that referenced gender identity, 80.7% of those responses referred to the victim and/or the transgressor as transgender, gender diverse, or questioning their gender identity. The participants whose responses included a reference to gender identity as the cause of the cyberbullying often noted that the transgressor may have been questioning or unsure of their own gender identity, and so they target the victim because the victim is living openly as a transgender or gender diverse person. Discomfort attributions were present in 14.4% of responses. Discomfort was also often double coded with gender identity, sexuality, or gender expression. Many of the responses related to discomfort noted that the transgressor may have targeted the victim because the victim did not act or dress in a way that is typical of their gender. Lastly, 11.8% of responses included a jealousy attribution. Jealousy often referred to the transgressor being jealous of the victim because they were popular, attractive, a well-liked person, or the transgressor was jealous of the victim without any additional information.

No single external attribution met the threshold to be included in quantitative analyses, thus, all external attributions were combined into a single code, External Causes, which met the 10% threshold with rounding (9.6%). External causes consisted of three subcodes. Online environment was included in 5.2% of responses. Participants who referenced the online environment as the cause of gender-based cyberbullying often noted that the anonymity of online environments, and/or the lack of accountability as the reason that the transgressor chose to cyberbully the victim. The second largest external code, social environment, occurred within 2.5% of responses. The participants who referenced the social environment as the cause of gender-based cyberbullying tended to indicate less direct social environments. For example, participants referenced the social norms within the transgressor's family environment or peer group as the cause of the victimization, aligning with the Social Reasoning Developmental Model. Lastly, external causes also included a broader subcategory, "other external attributions." This last subcategory only occurred within 1.8% of responses, and consisted of any other external attributions that participants made, such as the transgressor dealing with something else in their life that makes them lash out at the victim.

All other attribution subcodes occurred in 5.4% or less of responses, and primarily consisted of other internal attributions. Only 4.3% of responses did not fit within the attribution framework developed for this study and 2.3% of responses referencing the need for additional information to assess why gender-based cyberbullying occurred. One percent of responses believed that gender-based cyberbullying occurred for a reason not inclusive of the attribution framework, and 1% of responses were uncodeable, such as the participant saying that they did not know why the gender-based cyberbullying occurred.

Table 4. *Gender-Based Cyberbullying Attribution Examples by Condition.*

	Victim	Transgressor	
		Female Transgressor	Male Transgressor
Discomfort	Male Victim	She is uncomfortable with the concept of gender being fluid.	He is uncomfortable with Chris because he is ignorant.
	Female Victim	She's uncomfortable with Brittany's gender.	Brittany's gender beliefs do not fit Tristan's so he shames her to compensate for his discomfort with the topic.
Jealousy	Male Victim	Amber may be jealous about Chris, and she want to make a fool of him.	I think that Tyler is probably jealous or upset that Chris is on popular social media websites.
	Female Victim	I think there is a chance that Rebecca sees Brittany's photos and is jealous of them. That jealousy is portrayed as jokes and comments.	I think that Tristan is jealous and makes fun of her in order to make himself feel better.
Insecurity	Male Victim	I think that Amber does this because she has her own set of insecurities that she cannot overcome.	He is dealing with his own insecurities & chooses to put others down to make himself feel better.
	Female Victim	Rebecca probably feels insecure about herself and the way she handles it is by putting negative attention onto someone else.	He may make jokes because he is reflecting his own insecurities onto others, he has something he doesn't like about himself, so he picks on other people.
Gender Identity	Male Victim	Maybe Chris is transgender or doesn't conform to the stereotypes of his gender.	It is likely that Chris is gender nonconforming or does not identify with his gender assigned at birth.
	Female Victim	Rebecca is perhaps dealing with some gender identity crisis or sees that Brittany's gender identity is outside of what Rebecca considers to be the "norm."	Tristan might make jokes or comments about Brittany's gender because she might have features that are more masculine or she is transgender.
External Causes	Male Victim	Amber isn't afraid to make these comments online because there aren't direct consequences online.	Because he hides behind social media and uses it as an outlet to make fun of Chris.
	Female Victim	Rebecca probably was raised in a household/environment where not everyone is accepted.	Other people do it so Tristan observed them and did the same.

Note. Responses could be double coded.

Quantitative

To examine differences in the use of attributions concerning why the gender-based cyberbullying occurred, a mixed model 2 (Transgressor Condition: Male transgressor, Female transgressor) X 2 (Victim Condition: Male victim, Female victim) X 2 (Participant Gender: Male, Female) X 5 (Attributions: Discomfort, Jealousy, Insecurity, Gender Identity, External Causes) MANOVA was run for proportional use of each attribution, see Table 5 for the full MANOVA. Results showed a significant main effect of attributions, F (4, 756) = 39.07, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .172$. A pairwise comparison of the five attributions following the MANOVA documented participants were significantly more likely to use insecurity in their attributions compared to discomfort, gender identity, jealousy, or external causes. Participants were also more likely to use gender identity in their attributions compared to discomfort, jealousy, or external causes. Participants also utilized discomfort in their attributions more often than external causes (Table 5).

Table 5. *Mixed Model 2 (Transgressor Condition) x 2 (Victim Condition) x 2 (Participant Gender) x 5 (Attributions) MANOVA Results.*

	F (4, 756)	*p*	η_p^2
Attributions	39.07	< .001	.17
Attributions * Victim Gender	0.98	.42	.01
Attributions * Transgressor Gender	0.56	.69	.00
Attributions * Participant Gender	5.33	< .001	.03
Attributions * Victim Gender * Transgressor Gender	4.41	.002	.02
Attributions * Victim Gender * Participant Gender	1.18	.32	.01
Attributions * Transgressor Gender * Participant Gender	0.79	.53	.00
Attributions * Victim Gender * Transgressor Gender * Participant Gender	1.10	.36	.01

There was also an interaction between gender of the participant and attributions F (4, 756) = 5.33, p < .001, η_p^2 = .028, see Table 5. An attribution by participant gender pairwise comparison revealed that male participants were significantly more likely to use discomfort in their attributions than female participants, whereas female participants were significantly more likely to use insecurity and external causes compared to male participants. In terms of attribution by within gender comparisons, male participants were significantly more likely to utilize discomfort, insecurity, and gender identity in their attributions than external causes. They were also more likely to attribute insecurity than discomfort or jealousy, but they attributed gender identity significantly more often than they did jealousy. Female participants were more likely to utilize insecurity in their attributions above all other attributions, except for gender identity, and gender identity was used significantly more often than external causes (Table 6).

Table 6. *Proportional Use of Gender-Based Cyberbullying Attributions and Pairwise Comparisons of Attributions by Participant Gender.*

	Participant Gender	*M (SD)*
Discomfort (0-1)	Male Participants	.17 (.38)^{a,d,e}
	Female Participants	.12 (.32)^{a,j}
Jealousy (0-1)	Male Participants	.11 (.31)^{f,g}
	Female Participants	.13 (.33)k
Insecurity (0-1)	Male Participants	.27 (.45)^{b,d,f,h}
	Female Participants	.40 (.49)^{b,j,k,l,m}
Gender Identity (0-1)	Male Participants	.23 (.42)^{g,i}
	Female Participants	.19 (.40)^{l,n}
External Causes (0-1)	Male Participants	.08 (.26)^{c,e,h,i}
	Female Participants	.12 (.32)^{c,m,n}

Note. Pairs marked with the same superscript are significantly different; $^{b,e,f,g,h,i,j,k,l,m}p < .001$, $^{a,c}p < .01$, $^{d,n}p < .05$.

There was also a significant three-way interaction between transgressor gender, victim gender, and attributions F (4, 756) = 4.41, p = .002, η_p^2 = .023, see Table 5. Pairwise comparisons revealed that participants were significantly more likely to attribute jealousy when intergroup (i.e., male victim and male transgressor, or female victim and female transgressor) victimization occurred compared to when intragroup (i.e., male victim and female transgressor, or female victim and male transgressor) victimization occurred. Additionally, participants in the male transgressor condition more commonly attributed insecurity to the situation when there was a male victim as compared to when there was a female victim (Table 7).

There were also differences within the conditions. When faced with a male transgressor and male victim, participants were significantly more likely to attribute insecurity compared to jealousy, gender identity, or external causes. These participants were also more likely to indicate discomfort compared to jealousy, and gender identity compared to external causes. Participants who read about a male transgressor and female victim indicated insecurity and gender identity as the cause of the cyberbullying significantly more often than jealousy. These participants also utilize insecurity attributions over external causes.

Participants who read about a female transgressor and male victim attributed insecurity significantly more often than discomfort, jealousy, gender identity, or external causes. They also attributed gender identity significantly more often than external causes. Finally, participants were significantly more likely to attribute insecurity compared to discomfort, jealousy, gender identity, or external causes when they were faced with a female transgressor and female victim. They also utilized jealousy or gender identity significantly more often than external causes (Table 7).

Table 7. *Proportional Use of Gender-Based Cyberbullying Attributions and Pairwise Comparisons of Attributions by Transgressor and Victim Gender.*

	Victim	Transgressor	
		Female Transgressor *M (SD)*	Male Transgressor *M (SD)*
1. Discomfort (0-1)	Male Victim	.13 (.34)^{n}	.16 (.36)^{f}
	Female Victim	.13 (.34)^{s}	.17 (.37)
2. Jealousy (0-1)	Male Victim	.06 (.24)^{c,d,o,p}	.14 (.35)^{a,d,g}
	Female Victim	.19 (.39)^{c,e,t,u}	.08 (.27)^{a,e,k,l}
3. Insecurity (0-1)	Male Victim	.33 (.47)^{n,o,q}	.39 (.49)^{b,f,g,h,i}
	Female Victim	.35 (.48)^{s,t,v,w}	.28 (.45)^{b,k,m}
4. Gender Identity (0-1)	Male Victim	.22 (.42)^{p,r}	.21 (.41)^{h,j}
	Female Victim	.20 (.40)^{v,x}	.21 (.41)^{l}
5. External Causes (0-1)	Male Victim	.11 (.31)^{q,r}	.11 (.31)^{i,j}
	Female Victim	.07 (.25)^{u,w,x}	.11 (.31)^{m}

Note. Pairs marked with the same superscript are significantly different; $^{c,e,f,g,i,k,m,n,o,p,q,s,u,w}p < .001$, $^{d,h,t,x}p < .01$, $^{a,b,j,l,r,v}p < .05$.

Discussion

The findings from the current study suggest that participants predominantly attributed gender-based cyberbullying to internal characteristics of the victim and/or transgressor, with external attributions utilized at a much lower rate, a finding that aligning with and expands upon Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986) by demonstrating that within gender-based online contexts, bystanders largely attribute other people's behavior to internal, rather than external causes. The low utilization of external causes, particularly the online environment and social influences, suggests that many bystanders may not recognize how online environments can potentially facilitating gender-based cyberbullying. The quantitative analysis further expands upon the qualitative findings and aligns with the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al., 2010), which addresses how people balance their moral beliefs, their group memberships, and socio-conventional norms when faces with complex social situations. The current study documents significant differences in use of attributions based on participant, victim, and transgressor gender, and intergroup versus intragroup victimization.

Bystander Attributions

Participants demonstrated a great amount of diversity and complexity in their evaluations of gender-based cyberbullying. The current study found that bystanders were more likely to attribute the victimization to internal attributions, rather than external attributions, aligning with Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986) and mirroring previous research on workplace bullying (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). Along with the finding that participants were more likely to utilize discomfort attributions than external causes, this finding highlights that internal attributions, such as the victim's and/or transgressor's characteristics, may actually lead to decreased intervention behavior or moral disengagement (Amar et al., 2014; Herry & Mulvey, 2023; Herry et al., 2021). An important step in becoming an active bystander is believing that you are capable of doing something about the victimization (Latane & Darley, 1970). If a bystander believes that the victimization is due to something inherent about the transgressor and/or the victim (i.e., an internal attribution), they may view attempting to help as pointless, and thus choose not to intervene.

Similarly, the finding that 2.3% of participants indicated the need to know more about the situation before making an assessment suggests that bystanders may vary in the amount of information about a situation they need before

they feel capable of assessing the cause of the cyberbullying, and then potentially taking action. Prior research suggests factors such as anonymity online may impact bystanders willingness to take action (Kumar, 2025), and this, in part, may be due to bystanders believing they need more information about a situation before they can assess it accurately. Thus, future research may choose to examine the role of amount of information provided on bystanders' attributions concerning why they believe cyberbullying occurs, and what steps they may be willing to take to put a stop to it.

Participants were also significantly more likely to attribute insecurity above all other analyzed attributions. Cyberbullying is often seen as a way for the bully to compensate for low self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). The finding that insecurity was the primary attribution utilized aligns with this idea, indicating that bystanders may assume cyberbullies are bullying others to feel a sense of power or control in their own lives (Sanders et al., 2021). This may impede intervention, as bystanders may view the bully's insecurity as an internalized characteristic that their assistance would not resolve in the long term. This aligns with research that found bystanders are less likely to intervene if they do not believe their actions will make a difference in the bullying behavior (Sulkowski, 2011). Interventions aimed at helping bystanders address these misattributions could be an effective method for promoting bystander intervention, future research should assess this possibility.

Gender identity attributions were utilized more often than discomfort, jealousy, or external causes. This finding is unsurprising, as gender plays an important role in the victimization process, including how bystanders interpret cyberbullying. In one study, participants with more sexist attitudes reported more sympathy towards female victims of cyberbullying than participants with less sexist attitudes (Weber et al., 2019). When the perpetrator and/or the victim's gender is identified directly, such as though the use of gendered pronouns, or indirectly such as through gendered names, bystanders' attributions may be influenced by the gender norms of the bystander's ingroup, as well as the gender norms they expect the transgressor and/or the victim to hold. Thus, gender identity related attributions may impact bystanders' assessments of gender-based cyberbullying, and these assessments may then impact bystander behavior.

Relatedly, bystanders often attributed gender-based cyberbullying to expectations that the transgressor or victim was a transgender person. This may be linked to bystanders' understanding of gender norms and prejudice against transgender people (Perez-Arche & Miller, 2021). Transgender and gender diverse people experience higher rates of victimization than their cisgender peers (Messinger et al., 2022). It is possible that participants were aware that transgender and gender diverse people experience higher rates of victimization, and thus they believed that the victimization was due to those involved questioning their gender identities or identifying as transgender or gender diverse. Gender-based beliefs have been linked to how bystanders respond to cyberbullying (Weber et al., 2019), and so it is likely that these gender-based attributions also contribute to this process. Future research should assess how bystanders' gender-based beliefs influence attributions and bystander behaviors. Future research should also examine how identity-based characteristics of the bystander, the transgressor, and/or the victim are linked to bystander behavior. For example, researchers might examine how bystanders who are cisgender and transgender attribute the cause of cyberbullying when the transgressor and/or the victim is explicitly stated to be transgender, and how this knowledge is associated with their attributions and behaviors.

Some research suggests that bystanders who perceived bullying as normative were more likely to reinforce bullying (Machackova & Pfetsch, 2016), whereas bystanders who perceived helping behavior as normative were more likely to intervene (Chang et al., 2025; Leung, 2021). Other work found that bystanders holding negative internal attributions about the victim, in particular, was associated with less active bystander intervention (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023). The current study adds to this literature, suggesting that the specific attributions bystanders make regarding gender-based cyberbullying may serve as an important mechanism in the bystander intervention process. Namely, these attributions may determine whether bystanders interpret the situation as an emergency, take personal responsibility for what they witness, and whether they choose to become an active bystander, remain passive, or reinforce bullying. However, as the current study only addressed the utilization of specific attributions, future research should examine what attributions are linked with bystanders' viewing the situation as an emergency, their likelihood of intervention, their perceived acceptability of the victimization, and what bystander behaviors they believe they would engage in. It may be especially important to consider what attributions bystanders make in this process, as well as if the attributions are regarding the bully, the victim, or the environment.

Attributions by Participant Gender

Between Gender Differences in Attributions

The differences in proportional use of attributions based on the gender of the participant found in the current study support prior research using both Attribution Theory and the Social Reasoning Developmental Model. Namely, previous research has found gender differences in women and men's attributions, as well as their reasoning about victimization (Gini, 2006; Herry & Mulvey, 2023; Herry et al., 2021, 2023; Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al., 2010). The gender differences in attributions in the current study may also explain results from other studies that found differences in bystander responses to gender-based victimization, based on the bystander's gender (Amar et al., 2014; Ermer et al., 2021; Herry & Mulvey, 2023; Herry et al., 2021; Macaulay et al., 2019; Wang & Kim, 2024).

In the current study, women were more likely to attribute insecurity and external causes than men, which aligns with research that suggests women and girls, on average, are socialized to be more relationally oriented and sensitive to external feedback than men and boys (Jordan, 2023; Reigeluth, 2023). This may lead women to more readily recognize the emotional motives of other people's actions, such as insecurity, as well as other external forces like the role of online environments in gender-based cyberbullying. Prior research notes that women tend to experience higher rates of self-consciousness and rumination than men, which are associated with increased feelings of insecurity (Lilly et al., 2023; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). These findings suggest that female participants may have been more likely to attribute the cause of gender-based cyberbullying to insecurity because they are reportedly more likely to express experiencing insecurity themselves, and thus more likely to recognize these emotions in others (Abbruzzese et al., 2019; Löffler & Greitemeyer, 2023).

The finding that men were more likely to attribute discomfort than women may be linked to gender norms emphasizing emotional restraint and self-sufficiency in men. Men and boys are often socialized to suppress emotions, such as insecurity, from an early age (Cherry & Gerstein, 2021; McNeil & Zeman, 2021). The current finding may be reflective of this socialization process, where male participants attributed the cause of gender-based cyberbullying to discomfort, a broader and potentially more socially acceptable emotion for men to engage with, whereas women indicated insecurity, an emotion that may be considered more vulnerable than discomfort. Instead of attributing gender-based cyberbullying to the transgressor experiencing some level of vulnerability and lashing out, perhaps the male participants pulled from their own experiences and socialization. In particular, the male participants may have framed their beliefs about why the gender-based cyberbullying occurred to discomfort, an arguably more emotionally neutral attribution. This idea is supported in prior literature that found traditional masculinity norms discourage open expressions of emotions like insecurity (Croft et al., 2021; Mahalik et al., 2003). This socialization may, in part, explain how male bystanders interpret the cause of gender-based victimization, including cyberbullying, and why the use of these attributions differ based on the gender of the person making the attribution. Future research may choose to continue examining how gender roles and gender socialization may impact bystanders' assessments of gender-based cyberbullying.

Within Gender Differences in Attributions

Despite gender differences in the utilization of some attributions, both men and women utilized insecurity and gender identity over external causes, and men used discomfort more often than external causes. Additionally, men attributed insecurity over discomfort and jealousy, as well as gender identity over jealousy. Women, however, utilized insecurity over all other internal attributions except gender identity.

Research on the social process of bullying proposes that bullying may be a reaction to feelings of social insecurity (Søndergaard, 2012). Male participants attributed insecurity more often than discomfort and jealousy which suggests, despite other findings within this study, that insecurity may be considered more socially acceptable than jealousy, which can be perceived as irrational or as a sign of lost control (Lange & Protasi, 2024). Similarly, the finding that male participants utilized gender identity attributions over jealousy attributions aligns with the finding that men often navigate and respond to situations based on masculinity norms (Nielson et al., 2023). Overall, the current findings suggest that a bystander's gender is important to consider in how they attribute the cause of victimization. Additional research is needed to further probe this association and identify how gender socialization and gender-related attributions are associated with bystander behavior online.

Attributions by Victims and Transgressor Gender

Lastly, and aligning with our hypothesis, there was a significant interaction between victim and transgressor gender on bystanders' attributions. Participants largely attributed jealousy when ingroup gender-based victimization occurred as compared to when cross-gender victimization occurred. They were also more likely to use jealousy attributions compared to other attributions. Within conditions, participants in the male transgressor condition were more likely to apply insecurity attributions to the situation when there was a male victim as compared to when there was a female victim. These participants were also more likely to attribute discomfort compared to jealousy, and gender identity compared to external causes when it was a male transgressor and a male victim, as compared to when there was a male transgressor and a female victim. Participants also used insecurity attributions more often than all other attributions and they were more likely to attribute jealousy or gender identity than external causes when they assessed a female transgressor targeting a female victim.

These findings suggest that bystanders may view same-gender cyberbullying as rooted in a level of competition, navigation of power dynamics, or social comparisons (Geng et al., 2022; Ozden-Yildirim, 2019). This aligns with the literature on bullying broadly, which documents bullying as a mechanism for maintaining power over others (Andrews et al., 2023; Volk et al., 2022). Thus, participants may have believed jealousy led to victimization behavior because the transgressor was aiming to gain or maintain power and social status over the victim who shared their same gender group membership.

Intragroup Gender-Based Cyberbullying and Attributions

Aligning with the Social Reasoning Developmental Model (Rutland et al., 2010; Rutland & Killen, 2015), the current findings suggest that bystanders assess victimization with consideration for gender-group membership of the bully and victim. Participants who assessed male-on-male victimization attributed the cause of victimization to insecurity, suggesting that bystanders may interpret gender-based cyberbullying within this context as the transgressor targeting the victim due to a perceived threat to their own identity, status, or group membership (Ioverno et al., 2021; Valsecchi et al., 2023). Bystanders may be aware of this type of same-gender socialization, which could explain why they assessed this form of gender-based cyberbullying as rooted in insecurity. Similarly, when assessing female-on-female gender-based cyberbullying, bystanders were more likely to attribute jealousy or gender identity over external causes. This suggests that bystanders believe within-gender conflict among women may be tied to identity-related concerns, rather than external or social pressures.

Intergroup Gender-Based Cyberbullying and Attributions

In cross-gender scenarios, participants typically attributed insecurity and gender identity compared to other attributions, including external causes. This finding aligns with bullying behavior research, which documented that insecurity was linked to victimization within online environments (Feng et al., 2023). Bystanders, potentially aware of this association, linked insecurity to the cause of the gender-based cyberbullying, even when cross-gender victimization occurred. This finding, that insecurity was attributed to gender-based cyberbullying, even when the transgressor was female and the victim was male, suggest that bystanders believe both men and women engage in cross-gender cyberbullying, potentially as a means of coping with their own feelings of insecurity, self-doubt, or loss of control. Thus, not only does this research provide implications for considering bystanders' attributions in gender-based bullying, but, if insecurity or related feelings are a predictor of bullying behavior, as suggested in prior research (Choi & Park, 2021; Dietrich & Ferguson, 2020), one future direction for interventions to reduce cyberbullying may be to target people's social or relational insecurities. Not only might this reduce bullying behavior directly, but it may also help victims of bullying following experiences of victimization. Targeting people's social and relational insecurities may also bolster active bystander behavior, as a major step in the bystander intervention process is related to bystanders believing they are capable of helping (Latane & Darley, 1970).

Overall, the results of this study indicate that bystanders are taking relatively limited information, including the group membership of the people involved, to make complex attributions as to why victimization occurs, with the attributions largely relating to internal characteristics of the transgressor and/or victim, as is proposed by Attribution Theory (Graham, 2020; Heider, 2013; Weiner, 1986). These findings also align with the Social Reasoning Developmental Model, demonstrating the importance of inter-and-intra group information when thinking about gender-based cyberbullying (Herry & Mulvey, 2023; Herry et al., 2021, 2023; Rutland & Killen, 2015; Rutland et al.,

2010). Further, these findings are reflective of online communications more broadly, given that people must often make decisions about who they interact with online, even when they have limited information about the people they decide to engage with.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study examined bystanders' attributions concerning the cause of gender-based cyberbullying, revealing the complexity of bystanders' attributions within online contexts utilizing hypothetical written scenarios. However, observational research or focus groups may be beneficial to further understand how and why people make attributions within a variety of different contexts and in more naturalistic settings. Further, we only focused on binary gender victimization, with no information regarding if the people involved identified with their sex assigned at birth. Thus, we were unable to assess how those who identified outside of the gender binary would have responded if their identities did or did not match those of the transgressor and/or victim. We were also unable to assess how the participants' attributions may have changed based on additional gender information about the transgressor and victim, such as whether they were cisgender or transgender. Future research should explore how bystanders attribute the cause of victimization for nonbinary, transgender, or other gender diverse individuals, as well as consider other interrelated identities in experiences of victimization (e.g., gender-based cyberbullying of Black women).

The current study's use of hypothetical scenarios may have affected participants' attributions given they were provided with limited information about the situation. However, this may be reflective of the reality of online interactions, where people only have limited information about a situation in the moment. Future researchers may consider providing additional information or more realistic scenarios to examine bystander attributions in online spaces more comprehensively. For example, future researchers might create actual social media posts, with comments or re-posts that indicate gender-based cyberbullying, and allow bystanders to access the profiles of the victim and/or the transgressor. Creating actual profiles and posts would make scenarios more realistic and potentially more salient for the bystanders. We also did not assess how specific attributions were associated with expected bystander behaviors, or bystanders' acceptability of the gender-based cyberbullying. Examining these associations in future research would provide additional evidence of how attributions may play a role in the bystander intervention process.

Conclusion

Understanding why bystanders believe gender-based cyberbullying is happening may lead to interventions designed to address misattributions (Zedlacher & Snowden, 2023), guide bystanders to interpret the victimization as a problem, or promote action following assessments of problematic situations, such as cyberbullying (Latane & Darley, 1970). Overall, our findings document the complexity of the bystander intervention process, namely, how bystander think about victimization before they ever make a decision about whether to intervene. This study also demonstrates how the gender of all involved may play an important role in bystanders' attributions concerning gender-based cyberbullying. Ultimately, before we can take steps to discontinue victimization as bystanders, we must first assess the situation, and an important piece of that assessment is attributing the cause of the victimization. Thus, by understanding how individuals who witness gender-based cyberbullying attribute the cause of victimization, we may be one step closer to discontinuing victimization through utilizing the power of bystanders.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) has(have) no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of AI Services

The authors declare they have not used any AI services to generate or edit any part of the manuscript or data.

Data Availability Statement

The deidentified data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, EH, upon reasonable request.

Authors' Contribution

Emily Herry: conceptualization, methodology, project administration, formal analysis, investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review & editing. **Kelly Lynn Mulvey:** supervision, project administration, writing—review & editing.

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