



Material 4 English version

Security for Children in the Digital World: Online Interaction Risks, the Role of Bystanders, and the Importance of Digital Moral Courage

Interview with Felix Paschel, researcher at the Technical University of Berlin. The interview was conducted by Laura Schelenz from the University of Tübingen in a virtual conversation in August 2024.

LS: Mr. Paschel, you do research at the Technical University of Berlin on the safety of children in online environments from a psychological perspective. Why is it important to you to deal with this topic?

FP: Yes, so we know from various surveys, both internationally and in Germany, that children and adolescents are owning internet-enabled devices at an ever earlier age and are also using them very intensively, also autonomously. Growing up with digital media and the Internet is simply part of growing up today, especially with social media. And I think that the use of these online spaces can fulfill important functions for children and adolescents when we think about developing and testing out their personal identity. At the same time, I am also aware of the risks that online engagement entails, and the sometimes lasting and serious consequences that may come from online interaction. And yes, in terms of children's rights, I would like to use my work to help ensure that children can participate in online settings in a way that is appropriate in terms of positive development and protection.

LS: You have been researching this topic for many years. What are current topics and issues that you are working on right now?

FP: Well, online interaction risks are relatively new. These are risks that arise from communication and interaction with other users on the Internet. And I deal a lot with cyberbullying, online hate speech, non-consensual sexting and cybergrooming as part of my work. Cyberbullying is the repeated and intentional harming of other individuals via digital communication. Online hate speech includes derogatory statements about people on the basis of assigned group characteristics. Non-consensual sexting includes various forms of non-consensual exchange of intimate image or video material that has sexual connotations. And cybergrooming is the strategic building of a relationship of trust or dependency with minors on the internet, which then enables sexual assault, which in turn takes place both online and offline. And in connection with these online interaction risks, we are particularly interested in how we can involve children and adolescents, that is, the users themselves, how we can empower them



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to minimize these risks or, if they encounter them, how they can deal with them constructively. We are also particularly interested in young bystanders. How should they behave when they read posts or comments on Instagram in which other people or groups are deliberately disparaged? How should they behave when their WhatsApp group is used to deliberately make fun of other people and so on?

LS: You just mentioned that you work on bystanders and you also work on the topic of moral courage online. Perhaps you could elaborate a little on what that means exactly? Which group of children and adolescents are you working with exactly?

FP: Yes, so bystanders, simply put, are all individuals who become aware of an incident without initially being directly involved. If we now take the example of non-consensual sexting, it is not those who send a picture of another person without their consent. Nor are they the ones who are depicted in this picture, but they are the ones who are, for example, in the WhatsApp group in which the picture is sent around. And we also know that there are very high numbers of bystanders who remain passive, when they see something. This doesn't mean that they don't care about an incident. There are different reasons why bystanders don't intervene. And we are developing an educational program to motivate and empower young bystanders to show moral courage online, because we see extremely high potential in this group of bystanders. Okay, so, what is moral courage online? We see it as a form of prosocial behavior, that is, when you stand up for another person. Moral courage is public action that is primarily directed at the person committing the act, for example confronting the person who is sending an intimate picture around. And moral courage is motivated by the fact that someone else is violating a social-democratic norm, and I want to restore or reinforce this norm with my act of moral courage. Prosocial behavior can also include helping behavior, which is then primarily aimed at those affected and is not necessarily visible to other people, for example when I offer someone emotional support in a private chat. This is also super important, but moral courage online is mostly about visibility to others, because there are many hesitant bystanders who may then also be motivated to overcome their hesitations and intervene.

LS: Mhm, so the public nature of an intervention is important; and what do you think based on your research, how can we promote this moral courage online so that more people dare to take a public stance?

FP: We are developing educational material on moral courage online. We mainly follow the theory of the 'bystander intervention model' developed by Darley and Latané to explain the non-intervention of bystanders. And according to this model, bystanders have to go through five cognitive decision-making steps or stages before they finally intervene. First, they have to notice the incident; second, they have to classify it as critical; third, they have to take responsibility, even if they were not directly involved. Fourth, they have to be confident that they can make a difference with their intervention and, in the fifth and final step, they have to decide on a specific action and, above all, implement it. And at each of these five stages, bystanders are confronted with obstacles. For example, there can be a diffusion of responsibility if there are 20 other individuals in the WhatsApp group. After all, the other group members could intervene just as much as I could. Then the responsibility is distributed across all those individuals. Also, the last step (taking action) can lead to an anxiety of being judged. You may start to think about whether you have assessed the situation correctly. Maybe you took it too seriously and it's totally embarrassing that you're now writing about it. So, these can be thoughts that bystanders have that prevent them from intervening. And our approach is to tackle these obstacles and help adolescents overcome them. We do this by promoting empathy, reinforcing



prosocial norms, equipping youth with knowledge about risks and potential consequences. What is important in developing the material is to work in an interactive, action-oriented way, and that young people can explore and work on the content for themselves and try different actions.

LS: You've already mentioned that there are often obstacles to an intervention. So, there are many reasons why children and adolescents might not intervene when they see something. This makes the next question perhaps a bit difficult, but is there anything you can recommend in general? So, if a person has witnessed an assault online, is there anything you can recommend on how to deal with it?

FP: I don't think there's too much that can be recommended, but maybe a few things. Because acting with moral courage and being publicly visible makes you vulnerable, it is important that bystanders get together, look for a solution and implement it *together*. First, this makes them less vulnerable and, second, it has a much stronger effect, especially on those who cause the offense, possibly, and also on other bystanders. Young people should further not hesitate to ask adults for advice and support, for example trusted teachers, school social workers or school psychologists. And there are also many services on the Internet that can be used at an even lower threshold, not only by those affected, but also bystanders. I would recommend JUUUPPORT or the "Nummer gegen Kummer," for example, where you can get free and anonymous advice. It is also very important to remain objective, even if an insult can be very provocative. If you insult someone yourself, it doesn't help to de-escalate the situation. Last but not least, young people should simply have the courage. It's not about performing heroic acts, writing the funniest comment that goes viral and so on, but, yes, it's small actions that can make a difference.

LS: Thank you very much, Mr. Paschel, for these very interesting answers.