

**MAGDALENA IORGA**  
(coordinator)

**Cyberbullying in educational context**

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# Cyberbullying in educational context



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**PSYCHOLOGICAL, MEDICAL  
AND SOCIAL ASPECTS**



# THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CYBERBULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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**Magdalena IORGA**

## **Introduction**

The people benefit from the use of technology in various areas of their lives, from food preparation to transportation, retail, industry, agriculture, education, medical services, sports, and free time.

According to Valishery (2021), the number of internet devices is going to triple from 9.7 billion in 2020 to more than 29 billion Internet of Things (IoT) devices in 2030. Data provided by Statista showed that, in 2030, the number of smartphones will grow to more than 17 billion (Statista, 2020), and it was evaluated that almost 90% of the world's human population, aged 6 and older, will be online by 2030.

The Internet represents a change in technology that youth are rapidly adopting, especially adolescents and young people. A study conducted a decade ago showed that 91 % of kids 12-15 years of age and 97% of youth (12–18 years old) used the Internet (UCLA Center for Communication, 2003).

In 2020, immediately after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF evaluated children's access to the Internet in order to identify vulnerable points for online education and identified that 33% of children and young people have internet access at home, but with a significant gap between high-income (87%) and low-income countries (6%).

Kids and adolescents are the most common users of the internet for communication and socializing purposes. According to the research of Lenhart (2015), almost 92% of teens reported going online daily, with almost one-quarter saying they go online almost constantly with a great use of social media networks (SNs).

SNs refers to online communication networks that allow users to produce their own content (messages and photos) and engage in social interaction with both large and small audiences, known or unknown, and synchronously or asynchronously. (Bayer et al., 2020). Important results were presented, showing that 88% of young adults aged 18-29 reported having used some forms of SNs, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; roughly 81% of them used these platforms every day. In the USA, 90% of young adults with Internet access use social media, and 71% of all American 13- to 17-year-olds have a Facebook profile. (Lenhart, 2015)

The research in the field of use of Internet and SNSs revealed both positive and negative impact on psychological, physical, and social life. For example, Liu and his team identified that using social media to interact with others was associated with improved psychological well-being, whereas passive consumption of information on social media was linked with reduced well-being. (Liu et al., 2019). It is important to highlight that psychological well-being is, in general, a subjective evaluation of individuals when referring to their lives. Online interaction is supposed to maintain offline relationships, so some authors considered that online communication proves a high quality of psychological, emotional, and social well-being, meaning that the satisfaction refers to social support, too.

But some other authors considered that a higher number of contacts would provide less social support, explaining that the quality of relationships is more important than the quantity of contacts. Negative consequences of using SNSs were also revealed by studies: low body satisfaction, internet addiction, depression, stress, eating disorders, sleep disorders, isolation, and suicide attempts/suicide. (Brailovskaia et al., 2018; Duarte et al., 2018)

Some theories sustain that the internet has both a positive and negative impact on social life: a) it is used more to talk with strangers and less to maintain consistent communication with friends; b) virtual communication stimulates subjective well-being through its positive effect on the time spent with friends from "real" life, which in turn increases the quality of these friendships; c) the use of social media can help individuals to obtain online social support, generating social support and well-being, meaning that skilled people benefit most from internet use; d) the internet brings benefits for socially unskilled people, those with a smaller offline network and those less skilled in face-to-face communication. (Teppers et al., 2014; Baker & Oswald, 2010; Clark et al., 2018)

Since the increasing use of the internet and SNSs, scholars have started to study the negative impact of online interactions to identify the most effective preventive measures and to adjust interventional methods to different types of problems. One of the most negative consequences is related to aggressive behaviour in online settings, with fatal consequences especially among kids and adolescents. This growing phenomenon is cyberbullying, with a significant increase in reported incidents over the past 5 years. (*Youth Internet Safety Survey*).

### **Cyberbullying: An Increasing Phenomenon**

More than 80% of teenagers use a cell phone regularly, making it one of the most common forms of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is described as "being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social aggression using the Internet or other digital technologies" (Kovalski et al., 2012)

According to Bass and his team (2013), cyberbullying behaviours include spreading rumours, revealing personal information or photos without permission, sending threatening messages, and publicly making fun of someone.

Cyberbullying is a form of abuse or harassment in which the aggressor (aggressors) is/are teasing or insulting a person about body shape, intellect, family background, dress sense, mother tongue, place of origin, attitude, race, caste, class, name-calling while using modern telecommunication networks such as mobile phones (SMS/MMS) and the Internet (Chat rooms, emails, notice boards and groups). (Jaishankar, 2008)

In cyberbullying, the behaviour is intentional, repetitive, it implies an unbalanced power, is sometimes anonymous, and can involve a very large audience. Cyberbullying is different from online conflict. In a normal situation of conflict, we have an equal amount of power or friends, the incidents happen occasionally and imply an equal emotional reaction, we cannot identify a powerful individual, and, during or after the incidents we can identify that individuals feel remorse and assume responsibility for the act and make efforts to solve the problem.

Cyberspace provides a borderless environment for communication and a perfect space for those willing to stay anonymous and to persist in aggression for an endless period. Cyberbullying is permanent because the information posted online is permanent unless removed.

Vangelisti (1994) found evidence for nine types of aggressive topics: romantic relations, non-romantic relations, sexual behaviour, physical appearance, abilities/intelligence, and ethnicities/religion.

A meta-analysis reported mean prevalence rates of 16% of students cyberbullying and 15% being cybervictims, 11%-14% reported for engaging in or being victims of cyberbullying on SNSs. (Hood and Duffy, 2018). In a literature review conducted by Zhu and his team (2021) the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization and cyberbullying perpetration across countries ranged from 14.6 to 52.2% and 6.3 to 32%, respectively.

There is no great difference in cyberbullying rates across countries or continents. The “silent killer” (Paolini, 2018) is widespread in all countries among children and teenagers of all different races, backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and religious beliefs:

- Selkie et al. (2015) measured the prevalence of cyberbullying among American students aged 10–19 years old and revealed that the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization ranged from 3 to 72%, while perpetration ranged from 1 to 41%,
- Jadambaa et al. (2018) identified that 11.8% of investigated Australian adolescents were victims of cyberbullying,
- almost 45% of Israeli children and teenagers have been involved in online bullying, either as victims or as perpetrators, and 41% said they had

experienced cyberbullying, or “shaming,” more than once. Of those, 18% did not report the incident to parents, teachers, or colleagues,

- In Spain, rates ranged from 5% to 78.31% for cyber-victimization and from 1.37% to 56.5% for cyber-perpetration (Zych et al., 2016),
- 60% of Chinese youths declared that they had been cyberbullied,
- 67% of Japanese middle school students suffered from cyberbullying victimization,
- 0.3% of Korean children and adolescents experienced cyberbullying in 2021, with an accelerated decrease in the last five years due to preventive measures etc.

With the growth of the cyberbullying phenomenon, scientists have tried to delineate between aggressive online behaviour and freedom of speech and, at the same time, to provide as clear data as possible regarding the people at risk of being aggressors or victims. The third actor—the witness—has often been neglected in research, but some of it has proven that witnesses have a very important role in reducing and/or extinguishing cyberbullying behaviour. The specialized literature has studied the two positions of the witness—active and passive—emphasizing the fact that the passive witness becomes a silent aggressor in turn, due to the fact that the lack of intervention in the case of an aggressive incident only perpetuates the behaviour of the aggressor and reinforces the opinion of victim that reporting brings no change.

Due to its important negative consequences on aggressors, victims, and bystanders’ lives, cyberbullying must be viewed from its multiple angles and analyzed as a system in which students, teachers, parents, psychologists, institutions, and policymakers must be responsible and actively involved in preventing and coping with it.

### **Factors Related to Cyberbullying Behaviour**

Traditional bullying was a well-studied phenomenon, and sometimes cyberbullying is approached as a form of bullying. But studies conducted on kids and adolescents showed that there are a lot of factors that increase the risk for cyberaggression and cybervictimizations: personality-related factors, family-related factors, school-related factors, social-related factors, and environmental-related factors and coping strategies, too.

Some meta-analysis showed that cybervictimization was significantly correlated with higher levels of internalizing problems (depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, emotional problems, somatic symptoms, and lower levels of self-esteem,) but also with higher levels of externalizing problem behaviours (risky sexual behaviours, substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviours). Other negative outcomes identified were lower academic achievement and less life satisfaction. (Chen et al., 2017; Marciano et al., 2020).

Previous involvement in bullying was found to be a risky factor for both cybervictimization and cyberaggression, along with depression, risky online behaviour, depression, anxiety, and loneliness. (Marciano et al., 2020).

Life satisfaction, a good relationship with parents, social support and a positive school climate were found to be protective factors. (Marciano et al., 2020).

### *Age and grade*

More girls than boys reported cyberbullying victimization especially in the 11- and 13-year-old groups (10.3%), and the highest percentage was observed in the 13-year-old girls and 15-year-old boys (8.0% and 7.9%, respectively). The first SNs profile seemed to be linked to age 11, especially for girls.

Studies reveal that there is a big difference in the number of students who reported cyberbullying victimization: primary schools (33%), middle schools (24%), and high schools (18%).

Younger children are more likely than older students to report bullying incidents, and scientific data show that cyberbullying incidents increase with age, but cyberbullying reports decrease with age. These important results reflect several hypotheses: a) older students consider that they are more skilled at managing their conflictual situations; b) reporting is a blamed behaviour by both students and teachers; c) looking for support is a sign of weakness; d) sharing information about incidents will not solve the problem but sometimes may increase it; e) previous reporting experiences were not positive; f) cyberbullying events seem to become part of the "reality and prepare students for life".

Blomqvist et al. (2020) thought that older adolescents may be less likely to disclose victimization compared to younger adolescents because of their need for increased autonomy.

### *Sex*

There is an important amount of literature showing that males are significantly more likely to be involved in traditional bullying incidents than females but less likely to be involved in online bullying. However, reported data are different. For example, Marengo and his team (2021) reported higher rates of cyberbullying victimization in girls than in boys (9.1% vs 6.0% in) and higher scores for cyberbullying perpetration in boys than in girls (6.6% vs 6.2).

In many studies, girls reported being victims of cyberbullying more often than males, but scientific data also revealed that there is a simultaneous SNs high use among teenage girls than boys, facilitating cyber incidents.

Sex differences were also registered regarding the role of bystanders, Cao and Lin (2015) revealing that girls were more likely to perform prosocial bystander behaviours, whereas boys tended to behave more antisocially. Teenage girls were found to be more prone to offering help in safer situations while boys were found to be more willing to interfere in dangerous incidents.

Dilmac et al. (2009) identified that men enact direct bullying (such as name-calling, aggressive arguing) more often, and women are more likely to engage in indirect bullying (such as spreading rumours or ostracism).

Brody and Vangelisti (2017) showed that male participants were more likely to report on a male victim than a female, and women were more likely than males to report on a female victim. According to the same authors, female victims were more likely to be targeted for sexual activity topics, whereas male victims were more frequently targeted for sexual orientation and skills/talents reasons than female victims.

As shown in many meta-analyses, girls were more likely to become cyber-victims, while boys are more often cyber aggressors. According to Barlet and Coyne (2014), age can moderate the relationship, with girls being more likely to report more incidents during early adolescence and males during later stages.

#### *Family affluence, family type, and the level of education of parents*

Studies showed that children coming from families with a poor socio-economic level were more prone to becoming victims of both bullying and cyberbullying. Low affluence was associated with a greater risk of being both a victim (low economic level increases the risk of victimization due to lack of money, students do not participate in social events, they self-isolate themselves, they have poor appearances and low self-esteem) or perpetrator (poverty was associated with adopting aggressive behaviours, lack of discipline, and avoiding norms and rules).

Younger people from a single-parent household were more likely to report themselves as victims, compared to those coming from a two-parent household. Some scholars have highlighted that the level of education of parents is strongly related to the status of aggressor or victim, identifying that the higher levels of education the parents have, the lower the scores for cyberaggression and cybervictimization of children are.

Studies have shown that lower family affluence is related to a higher consumption of tobacco, but other research has provided contradictory results regarding the type of drug that increases cyberbullying. Teenagers' involvement in cyberbullying incidents was linked to both drug and tobacco use.

#### *Time spent on the internet*

Statistical data from 2005 revealed that 79% of Americans spent time online, averaging 13.3 hours per week, and the amount of time increased in 2009 to 19 hours per week. In terms of teenagers, statistics show that 63% of them spend time online daily, sending and receiving an average of 50 messages per day. Furthermore, 34% of teenagers have an SN profile. (Kovalski et al., 2012).

A tremendous amount of detailed scientific literature data provided a clear explanation of the relationship between the time spent on the internet using SNs and cybervictimization, finding that the more time spent on the internet, the higher the victimization score. Because children of a younger age now own a personal

phone (data revealed ages 6 to 11 years old), high rates of victimization have been identified even among primary-school students.

Islam et al. (2020) identified that adolescents who reported spending more time on the internet self-declared being victims of cyberbullying and traditional bullying more often than those who spent fewer hours on the internet. However, among those spending time on the internet, children who declared spending less time playing electronic games were more likely to be victims of traditional bullying (73.3%) than those who said they spent more hours playing electronic games, implying that teenagers who play electronic games are more likely to be socializing, competing and involved in playing teams with students who share common interests (playing the same game) or playing electronic games by themselves, and have less time to online chat or texting messages. Moreover, according to the Cho and Yoo (2017) study, the amount of internet usage did not show any significant explanatory power for cyberbullying. The authors showed that “individuals were not exposed to risk merely through greater amount of internet use, but that effects differ according to purpose for which certain content is used.”

*Interparental aggressive behaviours and history  
of physical or psychological abuse*

According to Fincham (1994), interparental conflict refers to “verbal or physical assaults and disputes between parents due to disagreement or other reasons.” Many studies relied on the aggressiveness between parents with children’s aggressiveness, sustaining that the parents’ models of behaviour—how they socially interact, how they cope with stress, and what kind of problem-solving strategies they adopt—are, in fact, models of behaviours that will be adopted by their children.

As stated by the World Health Organization (WHO), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a great impact on health even during adulthood. Among ACEs, WHO mentioned the most frequent ones: multiple types of abuse, neglect, violence between parents or caregivers, incarcerated parents, other kinds of serious household dysfunction such as alcohol and substance abuse; and peer, having a family member attempt or die by suicide, community, and collective violence. The greater the number of incidents, the higher the score for ACEs scale.

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022), approximately 61% of adults across 25 states reported they had experienced at least one type of ACE before the age of 18, and nearly 1 in 6 reported they had experienced four or more types of ACEs. A lot of scholars have highlighted that some chronic diseases among adults could be explained by the presence of ACEs and the malfunction of hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) which helps individuals cope with stressors. Statistical data revealed that by preventing ACEs, up to 1.9 million heart disease cases and 21 million depression cases could be avoided.

Child maltreatment refers to emotional/physical neglect, and emotional/physical/sexual abuse in childhood (Ashy et al., 2020). A lot of studies showed that maltreatment can predict cyberbullying perpetration throughout its psychological and emotional consequences. But a smaller number of studies focused on the internal cognitive processes of maltreated people to commit cyberbullying. One interesting explanation was provided by the perspectives of hostile attribution bias and anger rumination, and how these could explain the future aggressive behaviours. Hostile attribution bias refers to the “tendency of an individual to view another person’s behaviours or intentions as hostile in an ambiguous situation” (Gagnon et al., 2017) and anger rumination. Anger rumination is “a cognitive and affective factor of repetitive reflecting upon one’s angry experience and moods.” So, some authors showed that hostile attribution bias and anger rumination play a mediating role between childhood maltreatment and cyberbullying. (Li et al., 2022)

Abusive behaviour will develop in the new perpetrator, so the victim will become aggressor. The phenomenon in which abused children become abusers, and victims of violence become aggressors has been called “the cycle of violence” by Widom (1989). But, as the author’s research demonstrates, the majority of abused and neglected children do not become delinquent, criminal, or violent.

#### *Depression, anxiety, stress, and self-harm*

Cyberbullying can lead to adverse mental health outcomes. Depression, anxiety, and stress have been frequently identified among perpetrators, victims, and bystanders in cyberbullying. Cyberaggression was related to hyperactivity, conduct problems, low prosocial behaviour, low level of empathy, and frequent addiction (alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and the internet), while cybervictimization was associated with depression, anxiety, chronic stress, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, and suicide ideation.

Hankin et al. (1998) evaluated that the prevalence rates of depressive disorders increase from 3% to 18% between ages of 15 and 18, and many authors identified that the relationship between depression and cyberbullying is a bidirectional one. Marciano et al. (2020) identified that, on the one hand, depressed adolescents may have fewer social skills and a tendency to isolation that makes them less attractive to peers, increasing the risk of becoming victims. On the other hand, cybervictimization determines depressive symptoms and somatization among teenagers.

Liu et al. (2020) showed that victims of online aggression manifested post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, and the meta-analysis of Kowalski et al. (2020) showed that cyberbullying victimization was related to depression, stress, and emotional problems, all these outcomes representing a great risk for suicidal thoughts.

A lot of studies revealed that one of the most important consequences of cyberbullying is self-harm/suicide attempts, or suicide, and statistical data revealed

that girls were more likely to report suicide thoughts, suicidality, and self-harm than boys. Suicide attempts and self-harm behaviour are, in general, the most widely publicized and troubling potential consequences of bullying and cyberbullying via SNS, media, and represent an increased risk of suicide. Lucas-Molina et al. (2018), studying a large number of adolescents, identified that experiencing any type of bullying was associated with a greater risk of suicidal ideation, regardless of the gender.

#### *Child-parent relationship, Parental control, and Parenting styles*

The younger the children are, the more they need an adult to solve their problems or to guide them in solving them when they cannot handle it. That is why numerous studies have shown that the relationship between child and parent is extremely important for personality development and for providing models of social behaviour. Children who reported a high level of satisfaction regarding the relationships with their parents showed more confidence in themselves and more confidence in revealing incidents in which they were victims.

Numerous studies have shown that, in the case of victimization, both children and adolescents tend to report the incidents to a parent rather than to a teacher. Especially since cyberbullying most often takes place outside of school, the management of aggressive online behaviours is rather carried out together with the parent and not with the teacher.

Also, the parent is the best observer when the child is the victim or aggressor, being able to identify changed behaviours and attitudes or the deterioration of the quality of physical, mental, and social life.

Therefore, a good parent-child relationship represents a relationship of trust that increases self-esteem and encourages the child to seek support, to find ways of coping and to apply conflict resolution strategies.

A survey presented by Kowalski et al. (2008) on American parents revealed that 93% of the respondents believed that their children did generally good things through the Internet, and 65% of them were confident that their children were at no risk while on the Internet. According to WiredKids, parents are most concerned about the 4Ps—*Privacy, Predators, Pornography, and Pop-Ups*, and therefore they lack knowledge about day-to-day cyberbullying.

Many studies have shown that parental control plays an important role in victimization. Some of the studies carried out on children and adolescents have shown that the victims usually have parents who exercise low parental control. Limiting the time spent on the Internet, identifying critical situations in the case of cyberbullying incidents, monitoring conversations with people (especially unknown ones), as well as active and supportive behaviour in the case of incidents of sexual aggression all reduce the risk of victimization among adolescents. Parents' knowledge and awareness of cyberbullying signs play a significant role in the emergence, maintenance, and prevention of digital bullying. (Botsari &

Karagianni, 2014). Floros (2013) showed that security practices exercised by parents had a protective role in cases of victimization but less in cases of perpetration.

Younger children reported the incidents to their parents more frequently, whereas teenagers preferred to share the information with their peers. According to studies, children tend to talk less with their parents about their negative experiences as they get older, implying that parent-child communication is essential for maintaining a positive relationship.

In a study conducted by Ybarra & Mitchell (2004), 5% of the children and adolescents who self-reported being victims stated that they had no emotional relationships with their parents. The research team identified that adolescents who had very close relationships with their parents were less frequently cyberbullied compared to teenagers who declared that they did not have a good relationship with their parents.

Parental control and support were found to be related to the level of consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs among teenagers. The high use of them was found to be a predictor for cyber aggressions and a consequence of cybervictimization. Parental support was not related to initiation of smoking and drinking in adolescents, but some studies showed that stronger parental control is associated with less alcohol, cigarette, and drug consumption. (Ennett et al., 2001)

Parental styles also influence victim and aggressor roles among teenagers. The parental style describes how children perceive their parents' socialization practices such as the way they respond to their needs (*responsiveness*), and the way they use control (*demandingness*). These two dimensions are taken into consideration when classifying parental styles, defining four types of different attitudes, values, practices, and behaviours (Baumrind, 1991):

(1) the authoritative style: parents set clear rules and boundaries in a democratic environment open to discussion (high demandingness and high responsiveness),

(2) the authoritarian style: parents have high expectations of their children but at the same time they expect the child to follow the rules uncritically, and they are trying to control their child's behaviour even through punishment (high demandingness and low responsiveness),

(3) the permissive style: parents tend to be more responsive than demanding towards the child (low demandingness and high responsiveness),

(4) the neglectful style: parents show little or no responsiveness towards their children (low demandingness and low responsiveness).

The permissive parental style best predicts bullying and victimization (Gomez-Ortiz et al., 2014) being more often exposed to cyberspace aggressiveness without supervision, while the authoritarian style is more related to engagement in bullying and victimization. Also, authoritative/flexible parenting is a protective factor for both traditional and cyberbullying aggression and victimization.

### *Chronic diseases*

Cyberbullying is a risk factor for adolescents with mental health or physical chronic diseases, and, in turn, cybervictimization has negative impacts on mental health and psychosomatic disorders.

Serious chronic illness can have a detrimental effect on school attendance, participation, and engagement caused by the limitations imposed by the disease and not having a “normal” social life (medication, medical procedures, hospitalization, food and liquid intake, physical activity limitations, poor body image, weight status, impact on psychological life etc). Physical and mental fatigue or absenteeism could lead to poor academic results, so cybervictimization could be done in reference to a poor body appearance or a poor school performance.

Statistical data showed that children with cognitive disabilities or mental problems are more prone of becoming victims of cyberbullying. Despite the fact that a substantial number of studies showed a significant association between chronic conditions and peer victimization, intervention studies aiming to reduce bullying and cyberbullying among children were rarely evaluated. A high prevalence of victimization was reported by students with psychiatric diagnoses, learning difficulties, physical and motor impairments, chronic illnesses such as visual impairments, kidney chronic disease, asthma, diabetes, or obesity.

In terms of visual impairments, statistical data revealed consistent results. For example, in a study conducted on Malaya, 16.7% of the participants reported experiences as cyber victims, 3.3% as cyber perpetrators, and 36.7% as cyber witnesses. In another study developed by Wrzesińska et al. (2021) among Polish students with visual impairments, it was identified that more than half of the participants were engaged as witnesses, every fifth student as a victim, and 11.6% as perpetrators.

In the research conducted in Hong-Kong by Chan et al. (2018) among children with different types of disabilities, it was found that cybervictimization was registered in the cases of 45.8% of children with one type of disability and 46.0% of children with two types of disabilities or more.

In a multi-country study, it was revealed that overweight adolescents were more likely to have been cyberbullied compared to their normal-weight peers, but results proved to be different when countries were compared. Low scores for cybervictimization were recorded depending on the country where the authors assumed it was a normalization for obese and overweight people. In some European countries, weight stigma has been associated with laziness, self-indulgence, overeating, and a sedentary lifestyle, and probably the reason for cyberbullying being usually related to these characteristics. (Puhl, 2007)

Being different is sometimes seen as a risk for cybervictimization even if the aggression is directed at a person with high skills. For example, some authors have identified that highly skilled and gifted people register high levels of victimization. A very recent study by Laffan et al. (2022) identified that 31.3% of Irish gifted adolescents declared that they were victims of cyberbullying. Similar findings were

reported in previous studies of gifted teenagers in Spain (González-Cabrera et al., 2019), with a rate of cybervictimization (pure victim) of 25.1%. Gifted children can be cyberbullied due to some other aspects related to their abilities. They are perfectionists, having higher self-expectations, self-isolation, loneliness, stress, and low social support, not included in a peer group. Also, parents, teachers, or colleagues may put pressure on them to obtain good academic results, so gifted children can be sensitive to negative words and can show stress, anxiety, and depression.

### *Loneliness*

Numerous studies have highlighted loneliness as one of the crucial risk factors that might contribute to the development of suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Mitchell et al., 2018; McKinnon et al., 2016), showing that cybervictimization can have an indirect effect on suicidal ideation through loneliness.

The frequency of cyberbullying increases the fear of loneliness as a reaction to it, but previous research findings assessing the importance of loneliness in online behaviour are however contradictory. According to some authors, loneliness increases the risk of cybervictimization and may also be a result (victims will not share the incident and will avoid social contacts). But some others sustained that individuals with high scores of loneliness are not skilled for face-to-face communication, but they look for socialization in online settings. That is why some studies even showed that lonely people were found to be more open and active in online communication.

As Russell et al. (2014) showed, the “internet is favoured by shy, socially anxious individuals wishing to expand their social networks in order to decrease feelings of loneliness”.

### *History of bullying or cyberbullying*

Reactions to cyberbullying incidents are always influenced by previous experiences. Kowalsky et al. (2014) identified that the strongest predictor of engaging in cyberbullying is having been a cybervictim oneself.

Campbell et al. (2012) identified that, even if students who had experienced bullying considered that it was worse than cyberbullying, cybervictims reported much more social issues, as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression than traditional victims.

It was shown that adolescents with previous victimization experiences tended to differ from nonvictims in behavioural trajectories, but the results were contradictory. Some scholars identified that adolescent victims would like to look for revenge more often than look for psychological balance, and will internalize hostility and anger and engage more often in aggressive behaviours or criminal behaviours, being caught in the vicious circle of victim-becoming-aggressor. Victims typically experience a combination of short- and long-term negative

outcomes; victims frequently experience hurt, embarrassment, sadness, anger, and helplessness.

A recent study by Wang and Kim (2021) showed that bystanders with cybervictimization experiences were more likely to engage in helping behaviour when witnessing cyberbullying than those without victimization backgrounds. The authors highlighted gender differences in reactive behaviours of bystanders proving that female bystanders were more willing to intervene, while male bystanders tended to adopt a passive attitude. Furthermore, Wang and Kim found a positive correlation between the empathic distress evoked by witnessing cyberbullying and bystander intervention.

Some other scholars suggested that cyberbullying victims were more likely to help other victims because they could understand and empathize with them (Van Cleemput et al., 2014) with some gender differences.

#### *Internet addiction*

Internet addiction is characterized by “preoccupation, uncontrolled impulses, use that is more than intended, tolerance, withdrawal, impairment of control, devotion of excessive time and effort despite negative consequences, and impaired decision-making” (Karim & Chaudhri, 2012). Internet addiction was linked to increased use of online games and social networking sites, which increases the risk of cyberbullying.

Data showed that students who use the internet for games are less exposed to cyberbullying, but Internet gaming disorder is listed in the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V).

Internet addiction was found to be related to a dysfunctional relationship with family members, peers, and colleagues, as well as a higher consumption of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco. Due to its controversial role in cyberbullying, Internet addiction must be deeply analysed and revealed if it is not, in fact, related to some other risk factors, such as depression, anxiety, or stress.

#### *Substance use (alcohol, tobacco, and drugs) and self-harm*

Cyberbullying involvement in any role was associated with greater odds of cannabis use, especially among perpetrators (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2022). In a large number of research, cyberaggression was associated with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco use, explained by the fact that aggressors proved to have behavioural problems, and tended to have more social difficulties and mental health problems. (Campbell et al., 2013)

According to some studies, victims are more likely to use cannabis. This drug use may reflect a maladaptive coping mechanism in response to stress and anxiety caused by the experience of cyberbullying victimization, which creates a range of negative emotions for victims (e.g., anger, frustration, depression, and anxiety), precipitating the victims into deviant behaviours, such as substance use.

Pichel et al. (2022) conducted a study on adolescents aged 12-17, focusing on the association between cyberbullying and the consumption of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. The authors identified that children involved in cyberbullying aggression had risky consumption ratings up to three times higher, while victims' ratings were up to two times higher than those of children with no cyberbullying experience. In their opinion, cyberbullying and substance use were not isolated phenomena, and the research team recommended that the online aggression phenomenon should be jointly prevented.

In another study, Alonso & Romero (2020) showed that cyberbullying perpetration predicted increases in monthly alcohol consumption, while cybervictimization predicted alcohol and tobacco consumption in the following year. It is also interesting to mention some longitudinal studies conducted by Gámez-Guadix et al. (2013) and Modecki et al. (2013), highlighting that substance use, including alcohol and tobacco, predicted cybervictimization and not vice versa.

Similar results were obtained by Sampasa-Kanyinga & Hamilton (2015), who showed that adolescents who were female, younger, with a lower socioeconomic status, and who consumed alcohol or tobacco were at greater odds of being cyberbullied. Lee et al. (2018) identified that, in the case of cyberbullying, being bully-only, and bully/victim increased the incidents of all kinds of substance use, while being victim-only was only correlated with cigarette and alcohol consumption.

Some research suggested that teenagers whose parents or guardians are supportive and provide supervision are at less risk for alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use (Li et al., 2000), decreasing their risk of being involved in cyberbullying incidents.

### *Peer support*

Interesting gender differences were also identified by Cao and Lin (2015) showing that, especially in 13-year-old female adolescents, peer support seemed to act as an incentive to cyberbullying perpetration. The authors sustained that "perception of high peer support can boost involvement in cyberbullying perpetration, as peers are likely to support bullying behaviours."

Peer support was also found to be a protective factor in cases of cyberbullying victimization and suicide ideation. Students with social support were found to be less stressed and depressed and to look quickly for help in cases of cyberbullying. Due to the fact that, in general, teenagers report less to adults and more to peers, the latter become a very good and trustful source in case of investigating an incident. In his study, Worsley et al. (2018) proved that peer support attenuated the positive relationship between cyberbullying victimization and mental health difficulties.

Peer support is also important in fighting against cyberbullying by standing up in cases of online harassment. Active bystanders usually decrease the frequency of cyberbullying incidents and tend to isolate the aggressor.

Cyberbullying also could be a peer group process, and some studies showed that children and teenagers tend to act differently when they are in a group. Many qualitative studies identified that students declared that they never did by themselves what they sometimes did in a group.

So, peer support is an important factor in cyberbullying but both sides must be analysed. Joining an aggressive group will surely have consequences in behaviour. Peer group was found to have greater influence than family members, so the strategies that fight against aggression in online settings must take this influence into consideration.

### *Self-disclosure*

The use of social networks and self-disclosure were found to be good predictor for cybervictimization, especially among children and adolescents.

In constant online communication, individuals tend to be more open to communicating personal information. Some SNs ask that the personal profile be updated with demographic information such as age, gender, and geographic location, and encourage users to provide their real name and insert a profile photo. One of the reasons is to reach a social standard (the peers have a profile on a specific SN) or the desire to be more popular.

As self-disclosure on the internet becomes more and more common among young students, it is very important to understand the potential risk of sharing personal information online in order to avoid victimization. The users are becoming younger and less experienced. Also, as the age of having a SN profile decreased, students had less knowledge and awareness about the risks of sharing personal information.

Chen et al. (2017) and Peluchette et al. (2015) showed that the more widely private information is shared (personal data, photos, home address, phone number, passwords, location etc), the greater the risk of victimization. Furthermore, researchers discovered that victims who disclosed more personal information in online settings were blamed more for being cyberbullied and considered that the victim himself/herself is guilty for being victimized. Schacter et al. (2016) also identified that victims with high rates of self-disclosure are prone to receiving less help and support.

### *School climate and teachers' attitudes about cyberbullying*

A lot of studies have shown that, while cyberbullying occurs more outside of school than inside, teachers and school administrators play an important role in preventing and combating cyberbullying. Some of the school codes clearly present the behavioural rules and citing punishments against aggressive behaviours, but the researchers show that cyberbullying is present where the rules are perceived as being too weak and teachers too indulgent with aggressive incidents and perpetrators.

School climate and teachers' attitudes towards aggression are important factors in diminishing cyberbullying incidents. A positive school climate was found to be a protective factor for cybervictimization. For example, in schools where the students perceive that there are strict rules and perpetrators are prone to supporting negative consequences, as well as in schools where teachers are perceived as being intolerant to aggressive behaviours, cyberbullying is less common. So, the firm attitude of administrators and teachers against aggressive acts decrease the risk for cyberbullying.

Knowledge of cyberbullying's negative consequences, of how to identify signs in perpetrators and victims, an open relationship with students in order to encourage them to report any incidents, and previous experience increase teachers' willingness to discourage any aggressive act.

Cyberbullying also studied the role of teachers—aggressors, victims, or bystanders. Sometimes, the attitude of teachers could be aggressive, putting students in difficult positions in front of the class. Studies also showed that the passive attitudes of teachers in front of cyberbullying reported incidents is similar to passive bystander role.

The literature also provides data about victimization among teachers. According to Kopecký & Szotkowski (2017), the prevalence of cyberbullying among teachers ranges from 2.6% to 26%, and perpetrators were found to be both students and parents.

Teachers who experience cyberbullying were less prone to intervening in cases of similar incidents among their students and were less willing to take action against the aggressors.

Somatization (sleep and eating troubles, headache, abdominal pain, stress, depression, anxiety, and nausea) were highlighted by Sourander et al. (2010). A victimized teacher will have fatigability and reduced concentration, which is reflected in worse class management and less promptness in solving tasks.

## **Conclusions**

The phenomenon of cyberbullying must be analysed as a system, in which aggressors, victims, bystanders, parents, teachers, and stakeholders play their roles in preventing and fighting against this widespread silent killer. It was shown that due to its tremendous impact on mental quality of life, cyberbullying could be treated as a public health issue.

A lot of factors are involved in cybervictimization and cyberaggression and all of them must be considered when analysing the causes and consequences. Furthermore, preventive programs should be tailored to individuals who are at high risk of becoming perpetrators or victims.

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# MODELS AND THEORIES USED IN BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS FOR AGGRESSORS, VICTIMS AND BYSTANDERS

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**Magdalena IORGA**

## **Introduction**

Cyberbullying must be analysed as a wide-spread phenomenon, taking place in a virtual world, having sometimes unknown aggressors and bystanders (participants) and having no limit in time. Cyberbullying was registered in all types of societies, classes, ages, grades, or categories of people. The impact on the quality of life of victims and bystanders is still being studied, due to the advancing technology, the increasing number of devices, the growing number of networks etc.

The cyberbullying phenomenon is based on complex and multifaceted constructs such as empathy, emotional contagion, theory of mind, compassion, prosocial behaviour, egocentric bias, individual traits etc. The analysis of the phenomenon must take into consideration personality traits, social theories, educational context, legal aspects, ethics and morality, pedagogical interventions, and medical aid. Viewed as a single and unique problem, with no interconnections, cyberbullying will remain a new and complicated challenge for the society, generated by the insinuating insertion of technology into everyday life. A lot of theories have been proposed to explain whether cyberbullying is based on personality, developmental, social, educational, interactional, or medical foundations. Some of them will be presented briefly in the following sections.

## **The Hyperpersonal Perspective**

Since the use of the Internet has entered everyday life and the exchange of messages and emails are becoming more and more frequent in the online environment, researchers have turned to studying communication in the online environment, trying to understand the way in which messages are constructed and understood.

Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) and the Hyperpersonal Perspective (HP) have been widely applied to explain computer-mediated communication and how partners form interpersonal or even develop hyperpersonal relationships.

SIPT was developed by Walter in 1992. The theory offered a testable set of theoretical mechanisms explaining how and why individuals are able to engage in personal communication in an online environment when messages are transmitted without being sustained by nonverbal or paraverbal cues. Walter considered that individuals find ways to communicate in order to satisfy them, regardless of the medium, so individuals are able to "successfully adapt their communication to convey the meaning that is typically seen in nonverbal communication."

Face-to-face communication provides a large amount of simultaneous nonverbal cues, making messages more subtle. Computer-mediated-communication provides fewer cues, but as long as users find ways to use any accessible cues in a profitable manner, communication will be satisfied. This analysis of communication in a context other than a direct one (face-to-face) is not new; even in phone conversations, the intonation, the amplitude, or the vocal inflection are used to transmit personal and emotional messages.

The theory analyses the importance of channel, sender, receiver, and feedback effects. Briefly, computer-mediated communication provides little information about the sender, pushing the receiver to overgeneralize based on a small amount of information, and to form overly positive or hyperpersonal interpersonal perceptions that are specific to direct communication in a face-to-face situation.

The theory explaining how messages are transmitted in online settings has been sustained and also criticised but it has also brought information about communication that is initiated by using messages, and some scholars have identified a large utility of this theory into practice.

According to hyperpersonal communication, bullied victims are more prone to experiencing negative feelings in cases of cyberbullying. According to Walter, in computer-mediated communication, the victim may create an idealized perception of the aggressor, and the perpetrator can be very careful and selective before transmitting the messages in an anonymous way. The victim may feel hopeless due to the lack of control in a bullying situation.

Computer-mediated communication allows the victim to interpret messages in different ways. For example, if in a face-to-face conversation someone calls you "stupid", the interpretation of the message will be supported by nonverbal and paraverbal information, suggesting that it is about a joke or insult. The same message sent as text will force the victim to interpret the meanings of the message in various ways.

### **Sense of Mastery**

Mastery, defined as a "sense of having control over the forces that affect one's life, is an important component of psychological health and well-being across the life-span" (Lewis et al., 1999; Mikkola et al. (2022). Mirowsky and Ross (1998) identified that personal control determines a healthier lifestyle and helps people to permanently adapt to new challenging situations.

According to a lot of authors, the sense of mastery is related to a better management of the stressful demands (personal, job-related, or daily problems). Individuals with a high sense of mastery are more prone to proving skills useful to deal with negative events, cope with stressful situations, avoid chronic difficulties, have less financial problems, and prove a high level of satisfaction with personal and intimate relationships.

The majority of studies about sense of mastery were conducted on adults, and fewer on children or adolescents. However, some of them were interested in how the sense of mastery develops during childhood and what factors influence it. Some of the studies showed that the most important factors are family environment, parents, and socio-economic level.

Caspi (2002) identified that children and adolescents develop in the context of family interactions and family socioeconomic circumstances. Those with a higher socioeconomic level, for example, will develop a better sense of control, their family environment will teach them proper skills, and parents are a good source of empowering the children in order for them to gain self-confidence, as well as a good example of how they can solve problems. For example, the child can see how parents negotiate in cases of dispute and how they can mediate misunderstandings between their children. Their parents and siblings teach them the strategies of how to deal with social interactions and how to avoid negative relationships. Lewis et al. (1999) showed that the level of education is important. The authors identified that “parents with higher levels of education tend to have greater skills to solve complex problems, jobs with more autonomy and creativity, and more opportunities to make decisions. Parents’ education also plays an important role in promoting self control as children transition into adulthood.” Better educated parents may better help children to become more skilled and effective (Conger et al., 2007; McGuire et al., 2000).

Conger et al. (2009) conducted a study on adolescents in order to evaluate the level of their sense of mastery, and highlighted that “problem solving interactions within family subsystems (marital, parent-child, sibling) serve as key contexts in which children observe, learn, and practice skills associated with managing problems”, teaching them how to negotiate, to make compromises, how to forgive or to recognize their mistakes in order to better solve the problems with their communication partners.

Many authors suggest that parents must help their children increase their sense of mastery through challenging tasks, involving them in making simple decisions, and encouraging their participation in social groups, school, and community activities. These will determine the children develop their autonomy, feel more confident, better deal with various kinds of people, and make the right decisions. (Vargas Lascano, 2015; Ward, 2013)

According to some studies, age, gender, and experience all have a significant impact on the development of a sense of mastery. Girls are less skilled due to the fact that parents impose on them more restrictions and limitations compared to

boys, in order to assure them a higher level of protection. The sense of mastery increases, of course, with age and experience. That is why parents are encouraged to create more opportunities for their children in order to develop their sense of mastery.

### **Social Information Processing Theory**

Social information processing theory is a theory of conduct problems that is very used in explaining aggressive behaviours. It focuses on the way children, and often particularly teenagers process information in negative social situations.

The theory suggests that children and adolescents with disruptive behaviour problems may perceive, interpret, and make decisions about social information in ways that increase the risk of engaging in aggressive behaviours. (Dodge & Crick, 1990).

The manner in which they process social information is determined by their previous experience with attachment problems, or the presence of coercive cycles in the home. For example, children with aggressive experiences are more likely to attribute hostile intentions to their peers. If a child is pushed by another child in school, the “victim” may be more likely to assume that the “aggressor” did it on purpose in order to hurt him/her or to make fun of him/her in front of the colleagues, rather than assume that it was a simple accident. So, the victim will assume that it is about aggressive behaviour rather than a mistake.

The theory was widely applied in an educational context in order to help children to deal with cyberbullying incidents. The authors of the theory distinguished between reactive aggression (a response to a perceived threat or provocation) and proactive aggression (behaviour that is designed to achieve a particular reward). (Dodge and Coie, 1987)

In conclusion, children with behaviour problems are more prone to experience several social information processing problems. They are more likely to attribute hostile and aggressive intentions to their peers/colleagues, which generates fewer and more aggressive responses. So, they tend to notice the negative information that sustain their information and to response in an aggressive manner.

### **The Barlett Gentile Cyberbullying Model**

Barlett Gentile Cyberbullying Model (BGCM) is a theory designed to elucidate the underlying psychological mechanisms that predict cyberbullying perpetration (Barlett & Gentile, 2012). The authors considered that early, initial antisocial online actions are conducive to the development and automatization of learned cyberbullying predictors such as anonymity and cyberbullying attitudes.

The theory was launched to analyse the differences between traditional and online bullying, but it was widely applied and used in interventional programs. The BGCM posits that after a child harms another one using online messages, he/she

learns that she/he is more anonymous, and the physical strength often needed for traditional bullying to aggress the victim is irrelevant in an online context (termed BI-MOB).

Multiple aggressive acts done by the same perpetrator reinforce these ideas until they become automatic, determining the development of positive cyberbullying attitudes. Conforming to the theory of Barlett, these attitudes are predicted in cyberbullying: (a) the aggressor believes in the irrelevance of muscularity for online bullying (BIMOB), and (b) the aggressor perceives themselves to be anonymous (Barlett & Chamberlin, 2017; Barlett, 2015).

Finally, because the BGCM is cyclical, continual reinforcement will further predict cyberbullying perpetration (Barlett & Kowalewski, 2019). So, during the last decade, many researchers showed that (a) anonymity perceptions predict cyberbullying attitudes (Barlett, 2015), (b) BIMOB predicts cyberbullying attitudes (Barlett et al., 2017), and (c) cyberbullying attitudes predict subsequent cyberbullying behaviour (Doane et al., 2014).

### **General Theory of Crime**

The General Theory of Crime (GTC) was proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi in 1990. The theory sustains that people who have low self-control are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviours when there is the opportunity to do so.

The authors argued that the primary cause of crime is a low level of self-control, which develops around the age of ten, and remains stable across individuals over time. So, the authors sustained that parental education and child-rearing have an important role in developing self-control. Individuals with high self-control proved to be more successful in life and sought the long-term consequences of their own choices or actions.

Individuals with low self-control are incapable of predicting the long-term consequences of their actions, and if an opportunity arises, they engage in more delinquent behaviours than people with a high level of self-control.

Children with adverse childhood experiences such as neglect or abuse are more likely to commit criminal acts, while children raised in supervised homes, with high parental control will be more likely to resist temptations toward criminal conduct. In addition to criminal and delinquent acts, low self-control is manifested in tendencies to be “impulsive, insensitive, physical, risk-oriented, short-sighted, and nonverbal.” (Ngo and Paternoster 2011; Vazsonyi et al. 2012).

Also, researchers have explicitly examined the relationship between low self-control and crime opportunity in explaining bullying and cyberbullying behaviour (Baek et al. 2016; Bossler and Holt 2010)

Baek and his team (2016) conducted a study on teenagers showing that low self-control, opportunity, and gender have a significant influence on cyberbullying. The applicability of GTC as a theory is not only limited to criminal behaviours, but also applied to explain a variety of deviant or imprudent behaviours (Starosta 2016).

GTC has been used in this study as a theory to explain both cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Low self-control is found to increase both the risk of offline and online victimization. According to some studies, people with low self-control tend to make impulsive decisions, increasing their exposure to offenders.

For many years, GTC has dominated research on self-control and crime, and many scholars have shown the strengths and weaknesses of the theory.

### **Social Role Theory**

Eagly and Crowley studied the helping behaviours adopted by men and women and found that they acted differently towards victims who were looking for help. The authors found that men and women adopt different patterns for helping behaviours and identified that:

- women are more prone to offering help in case of safer situations, while men were more prone to helping in cases of dangerous situations,
- in the case that they are observed, men were more prone to interfering in a conflictual situation to offer help as compared to women.

Compared to boys, studies on younger children revealed that girls were more willing to show empathy and comfort and gathered around the victim to provide help and support.

When it comes to cyberbullying incidents, teenage girls seem to be more open to reporting or sharing information about the incidents, while male students tend to avoid reporting. The explanation is sustained by the social roles that girls and boys have; while it is socially accepted that girls are seen as more sensitive and vulnerable, boys must act as heroes and be powerful.

### **General Strain Theory**

General Strain Theory (GST) was proposed by Robert Agnew, in 1992. According to Agnew, there are three main reasons for deviance-producing strain:

- failure to achieve a positive valued goal (such as good grades),
- loss or removal of positively valued stimuli (such as death of a parent or end of relationship),
- presence of harmful/negative stimuli (such as school problems, emotional abuse, or bullying victimization).

According to Agnew, strain is not characteristic of a specific population or class, sustaining that strain leads to criminal acts independently of social class. But some scholars argued about the generality of this theory, sustaining that economic strain determines criminal behaviours or delinquency more often in poor people, and it is not generalizable for all social classes. When it comes to other kinds of criminal acts, the theory is still applicable.

Agnew considered that stress leads to negative emotional states such as anger (violent behaviour) or depression (the use of drugs), which are conducive to different delinquent behaviour without adequate coping skills.

According to the author, “Strain theory is distinguished from social control and social learning theory in its specification of”:

- (1) the type of social relationship that leads to delinquency,
- (2) the motivation for delinquency.

GST also asserts that “adolescents are pressured into delinquency by the negative affective states—most notably anger and related emotions—that often result from negative relationships”. The authors argued that “this negative affect creates pressure for corrective action and may lead adolescents to (1) make use of illegitimate channels of goal achievement, (2) attack or escape from the source of their adversity, and/or (3) manage their negative affect through the use of illicit drugs” (Agnew, 1992).

### **Routine Activity Theory**

The Routine Activity Theory (RAT) was developed by Marcus Felson and Lawrence Cohen in 1979. The theory explains crime opportunities that occur in everyday life by mentioning that crime is not randomly distributed but follows regular patterns in time and space. RAT comprises three components:

- A. motivated offender,
- B. target suitability,
- C. capable guardianship.

RAT provides a framework to understand the changes in criminal activity. The researchers suggest that crime behaviours are likely to occur due to those three factors (the presence of a likely offender, a suitable target, and a lack of capable guardianship), and if one of the components is missing, the crime is less likely to occur (Navarro and Jasinski 2012).

The operationalization of RAT’s constructs of offender, target, and the absence of capable guardianship are differently analysed in the cyberbullying literature. For example, Navarro and Jasinski (2012) showed that RAT provides a good explanation for cyberbullying among adolescents.

Some RAT elements are more significant than others when explaining cyberbullying behaviours. For example, bystanders, parents, teachers, and school staff were proven to be very important in diminishing the risk for cyberbullying victimization but not in preventing the victimization through cyberstalking (Reyns et al. 2016). The majority of studies also showed that victims tend to disclose the incidents to parents or peers, highlighting the importance of the guardian.

### **The General Aggression Model**

The General Aggression Model (GAM) was proposed by Anderson and Huesmann, in 2002. The model provides a theoretical analysis of the individual,

and the situational factors that may contribute to the social, cognitive, and behavioural outcomes associated with aggressive behaviours.

GAM considers the role of social, cognitive, personality, developmental, and biological factors in aggression. The model proposes that human aggression is tremendously influenced by knowledge structures, which impact a large variety of social-cognitive phenomena including perception, interpretation, decision, and behaviours.

Some of the most important knowledge structures include attitudes and beliefs. For example, an individual may consider that the aggressive behaviour is normal and a positive way to act. The person perceives ambiguous events as hostile; he or she expects aggression from others and appreciates that conflicts should be resolved by fighting back.

A person who believes aggression is normal and useful is more likely to be more aggressive than a person who believes aggression is not normal. That same person would be even more likely to behave aggressively if he or she was provoked. In contrast, as the number of protective factors increases, the likelihood of aggression decreases. For example, someone who is highly agreeable and has just received a gift is relatively less likely to behave aggressively. (Allen et al., 2018; DeWall et al., 2018). The authors suggested that repeated exposure to violence decreased normal affective aversion to violence through a process of desensitization. (Huesmann & Taylor, 2006).

The theory was used specially to explain social media violence, but also criticized. For example, data to support the GAM and social cognitive approaches to aggression have never been conclusive, in the opinion of Ferguson and Dyck (2012).

### **Online Disinhibition Effect**

The online disinhibition effect was described by Suler (2004) in order to explain the changes in online behaviour. According to Suler, “online disinhibition is a phenomenon where individuals in cyberspace do or say things that they would not say or do in “real-life” situations as they feel less restrained and able to express themselves more freely.”

The researcher proposed two types of online disinhibition. The first one is benign disinhibition (people are motivated to share personal details, fears, and wishes). For example, it was proven that socially anxious individuals and subjects with high levels of loneliness may feel better in an online environment and are more willing to disclose information about themselves. The second type is “toxic disinhibition” (using rude language, criticism, anger, threats etc; Mueller-Coyne et al., 2022).

The author sustained his explanation by using six factors that interact with each other in creating this online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004; Cheung et al., 2020):

- dissociative anonymity (“the degree to which an individual perceives that he/she can hide or change his/her true identity in the online environment”),

- invisibility (“the degree to which an individual perceives that others do not physically see him/her in the online environment”),
- asynchronicity (“the degree to which an individual perceives that the mode of communication enables delayed responses in the online environment”),
- solipsistic introjection (“the degree to which an individual perceives a voice or an image of the other person in his/her mind in online communication”),
- dissociative imagination (“the degree to which an individual perceives the online environment as an imaginary world that has no connection to reality”),
- minimization of authority (“the degree to which an individual perceives the absence or diminishing influence of real-life authority figures in the online environment”).

Many scholars have used this theory to explain behaviours in cyberbullying. For example, Lapidot-Leffler and Barak (2015) explained how the interaction between anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye contact had significant effects on total self-disclosure. (Lai and Tsai, 2016; Huang et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2022.

### **The Theory of Planned Behaviour**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB, AJZEN, 1991) was used in order to explain the intention to help cyberbullying victims. Ajzen stated that an individual’s belief in a certain behaviour, compliance with subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control were the determining factors for the intention to commit the behaviour or not.

According to Ajzen (1991), behaviours appreciated as having desirable outcomes are valued with a positive attitude, while those with negative outcomes are valued with negative attitudes.

This theory is suitable to explain the aggressiveness among teenagers, due to the fact that this developmental period of adolescence is characterized by a high influence from peers. The study by Burton et al. (2013) showed that teenage students who believed in subjective norms at a high level and perceived less behavioural control had a strong tendency to develop aggressive behaviours physically. Calvete et al. (2010) identified that minors who consider that the aggressive behaviour is justified are more prone to behaving aggressively.

### **The Bystander Effect**

The bystander effect could also be used to explain the lack of intervention in the case of witnesses. The bystander effect is a social psychological theory that states that an individual’s likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in an emergency. The more witnesses there are, the less likely someone will intervene to assist the victim. Latané and Darley (1970) identified that there are 3 different psychological processes that might prevent a bystander from helping a person in distress: (a) diffusion of responsibility (the higher number of

witnesses conduct to the idea that they need to interfere less; the witness will consider that another person will help the victim); (b) evaluation apprehension (fear of being publicly judged by doing something that the others are avoiding to do); and (c) pluralistic ignorance (when a situation is perceived as ambiguous, the witnesses are more prone to acting under the group pressure – doing what the others are doing).

The authors sustained that witnesses must evaluate when a situation is an urgent one or an emergency situation, and 5 stages were described:

1. The bystander must notice that something is amiss.
2. The bystander must define that situation as an emergency.
3. The bystander must assess how personally responsible they feel.
4. The bystander must decide how best to offer assistance.
5. The bystander must act on that decision.

The theory sustained that the group always inhibit individuals' responses to potential emergencies, and witnesses must be aware of the pressure on their own decisions.

## Conclusions

Numerous theories have been used to explain the formation of aggressive behaviour and its transposition from face-to-face communication to online communication. The alarming increase in the incidence of cyberbullying among young people, and especially the decrease in the age at which such incidents occur, have given rise to the explanations of numerous researchers in the field of aggression. Theories related to personality, behaviour, learning, social environment, socio-economic level etc. have identified the various aspects and factors related to cyberbullying. The considerable effort of all researchers is, of course, to prevent aggressive behaviours and to reduce the undeniable impact of online aggression on people's physical, mental and social health.

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# BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH CHRONIC DISEASES

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**Dana Teodora ANTON-PĂDURARU**

## **Introduction**

Bullying and cyberbullying represent public health problems. Bullying is aggressive, intentional behaviour, repeated over time against one or more people with difficulties in defending themselves, which involves exposure to negative actions, with the intention of hurting the victims, causing them suffering, pain, and stress (Bass, 2019; Morton, 2019; Pinquart, 2017; Sentenac, 2012). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), bullying is the unwanted aggressive behaviour of a young person or group of young people who are not relatives or partners in a relationship, and which involves an imbalance of power which is repeated several times (Morton, 2019).

Cyberbullying is a challenge in the digital age that has become more common with technological advances. The emergence and development of digital technologies have led to the development of this new form of bullying with often greater impact than “traditional” bullying. Cyberbullying is different from “traditional” bullying as it can be exercised at any time, often anonymously, on several people, usually by young people, and users of electronic devices (Bass, 2019; De Smet, 2014). It can appear in the form of email, texts, direct SMS, public messages, and photos (Beglin, 2020). In this way, it is possible to victimize another child or colleague at any time of the day or night, both at school and at home (John, 2018).

Bullying and cyberbullying represent complex, fast-growing phenomena and health issues that affect children and adolescents, especially those with chronic diseases (Beckman, 2013).

## **Bullying and cyberbullying**

Although apparently, they may seem identical, bullying and cyberbullying are different behaviours. Bullying is characterized by several particularities: repeated behaviour, causing damage, and the existence of power imbalance (Sentenac, 2012).

There are different types of bullying:

- physical bullying, in which the victim is insulted, punished, or hit,

- relational (social) bullying, in which the aggression is more subtle, the victims are excluded from social life, or different rumours are spread about them,
- verbal bullying that involves spreading fake news, mocking, teasing, and threats,
- cyberbullying: victimization takes place through electronic means (Pinquart, 2017; Sentenac, 2012).

Bullying has a stronger physical effect than cyberbullying (Robertson, 2013), and can appear in visible forms that are easier to identify, but also in insidious forms (Kazee, 2020).

The risk factors for the occurrence of bullying are:

- middle-aged children who make friends more easily,
- physical appearance or attractiveness,
- physical strength,
- different chronic diseases,
- the state of mental health,
- visibility of the disease,
- different ethnicities and minorities,
- gay or transsexual people,
- relationship with parents, negative parental behaviour,
- low socio-economic status (Bass, 2019; Pinquart, 2017).

In the case of patients with chronic diseases, the risk factors also include:

- difficulties in moving or mobilizing,
- speech disorders, phonetic tics,
- mannerisms,
- special care needs (Sentenac, 2012).

In the case of cyberbullying, the risk of occurrence is all the greater the longer the time spent using digital technologies (phone, laptop, tablet etc.) (Liu, 2021). Although the use of electronic devices is nowadays present from an early age, victimization through cyberbullying tends to occur at older ages, when children and adolescents spend more time in front of these devices (John, 2018; Monks, 2018). Some of the children who are victims of cyberbullying were previously also victims of traditional bullying (Monks, 2016).

Protective factors include:

- protective parental behaviour,
- positive parental attitude,
- pleasant atmosphere at school,
- the involvement of teachers (Bass, 2019).

In bullying, there are both aggressors and victims, but there is also discussion about the “aggressor-victim” category, in which the person in question can aggress other people but can also be the victim of other people (Bass, 2019).

The consequences of bullying on the victim are represented by the occurrence of anxiety, depression, poor self-image, somatic disorders, relational problems, attempts at antisocial behaviour, tendency to isolation, stigmatization, low adherence to treatment, low school performance, alcohol consumption, drugs and tobacco, suicide tendency, and crime (Bass, 2019; Beckman 2013; Monks, 2009; Sentenac, 2012).

The physical effects of cyberbullying include sleep disorders and weight gain as child victims respond to it by consuming more food (Beglin, 2020). Symptoms characteristic of social anxiety and depression are more common in children subjected to cyberbullying than in those who suffer from traditional bullying (Monks, 2016).

Children and adolescents present a higher risk of becoming victims of different types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, cyberbullying, and bullying due to the presence of certain diseases). According to Due et al., cited by Pinquart, approximately 15-18% of children aged between 11 and 15 years have suffered due to bullying, a fact that can affect the state of health, as well as school performance (Sentenac, 2012). It has also been observed that adolescents over 16 years of age are more frequently victims of bullying compared to younger adolescents (Sentenac, 2012).

According to the National Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System, 20% of high school students suffer from bullying, and 15% from cyberbullying (Bass, 2019).

### **Chronic disease - risk factor in cyberbullying**

Patients with various chronic diseases (obesity, diabetes, epilepsy, bronchial asthma, eczema etc.) can be frequent “targets” of bullying and cyberbullying (Sentenac, 2012).

Children with chronic diseases are three times more affected by social exclusion than healthy children, being perceived as “different” (less strong, without social skills, without the ability to develop relationships with other children), which makes them more vulnerable to bullying and cyberbullying (Lindsay, 2011). For example, obese patients have a 51% risk (VanGeel et al., 2014). It has been observed that patients with more visible diseases (obesity, epilepsy, disabilities, craniofacial impairment, visual deficits) have a higher risk of suffering from bullying compared to those with invisible diseases (chronic kidney diseases, asthma). Also, psychological problems arising as a consequence of chronic diseases, such as poor self-image, can increase the risk of these patients being victims of bullying. This fact leads to less social interaction, lower treatment adherence, and lower school performance (Pinquart, 2017).

The risk of being a victim of bullying increases with age, with teenagers being more affected. Compared to girls, boys are more frequently victims of bullying, especially physical bullying, but at the same time, they can also be aggressors (Pinquart, 2017). Girls are more frequently the victims of emotional bullying (Bass, 2019). Regarding the type of bullying, in older children, verbal

bullying is more common, and physical bullying is less common. With increasing age, it has been observed that both the number of cases and the severity of cyberbullying increase as a result of expanded access to digital devices (Morton, 2019).

School should be a safe place, with a low number of cases of bullying and cyberbullying, but unfortunately, this is not the case, as children and especially teenagers are dependent on technology when they want to communicate (Beglin, 2020).

Children with disabilities who attend normal schools have an increased risk of being bullied, in contrast with those who attend schools for children with disabilities, because in the latter case, although they can be victims of peers with other types of disabilities, the risk is lower. Outside of special schools, students with disabilities can be victims of healthy children (Pinquart, 2017). Bullying and cyberbullying are more common during the school year than during the holidays, as well as when using public transport to school or home (Humphrey, 2015). Two-thirds of acts attributed to bullying take place at school (Monks, 2009).

The identification of bullying and cyberbullying through periodic screening requires the administration of questionnaires such as the Bright Futures Questionnaire, or Home, Education/Employment, Eating, Activities, Drugs, Sexuality, Suicide/Depression and Safety (HEEADSSS), The Bully Victimization Scale, The Olweus Bully- Victim Questionnaire (Bass, 2019; Morton, 2019).

### **Bullying and cyberbullying of children and adolescents with chronic diseases**

One of the reasons why children and adolescents with chronic diseases more frequently become victims of bullying is represented by their different appearance or their different behaviour in which language disorders, motor disorders, and learning difficulties are present (Sentenac, 2012).

#### *Bullying and cyberbullying of overweight or underweight children*

Nutritional status is an indicator of physical and mental quality, its assessment being especially important in children. Weight change, either in terms of being overweight or underweight, increases the risk of bullying and cyberbullying. Children subjected to bullying have different nutritional deficits and unhealthy eating habits, requiring interventions both to stop bullying and to improve their nutritional status. Excessive or insufficient consumption of nutrients has negative effects on health, including the occurrence of bullying (El-Sahar, 2019). Poor nutrition can be a risk factor for bullying, especially in adolescents (Jackson, 2017).

Overweight children, as well as thin, tall, short, ugly, or beautiful children, can be victims of bullying. Different studies cited by Alexius et al. showed the presence of more cases of bullying in obese girls (Alexius, 2018). Conversely, thin

boys are more frequently victims of bullying compared to thin girls (Sentenac, 2012).

Malnutrition can be an indicator not only of physical, but also mental, cognitive-emotional, and behavioural problems. Children who are victims of bullying suffer from malnutrition and have a lower intake of nutrients (proteins, vitamins, minerals) compared to those with normal weight (El-Sahar, 2019). Lack of body satisfaction can also appear in very thin children, often being associated with victimization, especially at school. Low weight can be a risk factor that causes conflicts at school, including bullying (Zequinão, 2022).

Hughes et al. (2014) cited by El-Sahar & Hala (2019) mention that bullying and cyberbullying are frequently associated with breakfast skipping, as well as with the consumption of a greater number of snacks (3-6/day) and also with eating junk food. Sweet drinks and salty snacks are associated with more violent behaviour, intimidation, and physical aggression. Children who suffer from bullying consume less protein, fibre, and water (El-Sahar, 2019). The study by Jackson et al. (2017) on mice observed the connection between protein deficiency and aggressive behaviour.

Obesity is a chronic health condition characterized by body mass index values above 95 per cent (Şahin, 2021). The prevalence of obesity is increasing in all age groups, with the health consequences being numerous: type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, asthma, chronic pain, digestive and endocrine disorders, osteo-articular damage, and psychological consequences (Álvarez-García, 2020). Obese children present various psychological problems starting from negative body image to bad self-image, stigmatization, eating disorders, somatization, depression, anxiety, all of which being associated with bullying (Şahin, 2021). Bullying is prevalent among obese patients, both as victims and aggressors, and is most likely due to increased body weight (Pinquart, 2017; Sahin, 2021). Obese boys, being stronger than their peers with normal weight, can often be aggressors, while obese girls are more often victims (Şahin, 2021).

The study by Van Geel et al. (2014) concluded that overweight and obese children and adolescents from countries with a high socio-economic level present a 1.19-1.51 times higher risk of being victims of bullying, while the study by Lian et al (2018) conducted on teenagers from 39 countries in Europe and the USA found a 1.40-1.91 times higher risk of being victims of bullying (Lian, 2018; Van Geel, 2014).

Yen et al. (2014) observed a positive correlation between body mass index (BMI) and the degree of bullying victimization, respectively between BMI and depression. He also observed a bidirectional link between obesity-BMI-depression (Yen, 2014). Sergentanis et al. (2021), in a study conducted on a number of 8785 teenagers aged between 14 and 17.9 years from seven countries in the European Union, including Romania, observed a positive correlation between the degree of overweight and obesity, and victimization through cyberbullying. In the EU NET ADB study, the results showed that the highest rate of cyberbullying victimization

was in Romania (37.30%), compared to Spain, where the rate was lower (13.30%) (Sergentanis, 2021).

Cyberbullying victimization may be more prevalent in obese children and adolescents. For example, in a US study, 59-61% of adolescents were victims of cyberbullying in the previous year (DeSmet, 2014).

Exposure to bullying plays an important role, both obesity itself and bullying being able to contribute to the emergence of mental health problems. Bullying can contribute to the appearance of emotional disturbances, rejection by peers, low school performance, and is strongly correlated with the degree of depression. Exposure to bullying can cause stress in obese children, especially in those who present with both anxiety and depression (Şahin, 2021). In some cases, it can even lead to giving up physical activity and reducing the effectiveness of weight loss programs, which can also affect the quality of life of these children (DeSmet, 2014). In the long term, bullying can be a risk factor for the appearance of psychological and psychiatric symptoms in adulthood (Yen, 2014).

Adolescence is a period in which physical, psychological, and social changes take place, and in which adolescents want to become independent. It was observed that being accepted in a certain group, as well as establishing friendships depend on the physical aspect. Bad self-image can contribute to the occurrence of bullying and cyberbullying, but also victimization can contribute to the appearance of this low self-image and suicide attempts (DeSmet, 2014). Lack of satisfaction with body image can lead to mental problems, eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and finally to a decrease in the quality of life (Zequinão, 2022).

Overweight children are frequently perceived as undisciplined, indolent, careless, and less attractive as a source of entertainment, increasing the risk of aggression, particularly verbal aggression (Kanders, 2021; Sahin, 2021). Physical appearance can be the reason for negative comments that lead to a negative body image. Dissatisfaction with one's own image can be a risk factor for becoming a victim of bullying, especially if it is associated with difficulties in interacting with peers or isolation from them, and even with increased school absenteeism. Low self-image is a factor that causes obese adolescents to be more reserved when establishing friendships (Álvarez-García, 2020).

In the study by Alexius et al., the prevalence of bullying in obese and overweight children was 29%, compared to 13.20% in those with normal weight (Alexius, 2018).

Regarding the type of bullying, it was observed that written and verbal cyberbullying are more frequent, followed by exclusion from the online environment. There are also cases of visual cyberbullying, in which photos of obese children and adolescents are shared, thus becoming a source of entertainment (Álvarez-García, 2020).

For obese children and teens, schools need to have programs for their physical and mental health.

*Bullying and cyberbullying of children with diabetes mellitus*

Children with diabetes mellitus often become victims of bullying because they are “different”, just like other children with different chronic diseases.

A literature review of 32 articles concluded that 85.70% of children and adolescents with diabetes mellitus are victims of bullying, the frequency being higher compared to that of bullying in children with other chronic diseases, or with the healthy ones (Andrade, 2019).

Children and adolescents with diabetes mellitus, who are victims of bullying, may experience depression more frequently, one of the consequences being low adherence to treatment (Sentenac, 2012). The presence of diabetes is a factor that limits the socialization of these patients, who are often subjected to verbal, physical, social, psychological, and sexual bullying (Andrade, 2019).

Bullying causes stress and complicates the management of diabetes mellitus, with patients failing to strictly follow their diet and physical activity program.

In the case of patients with diabetes mellitus who follow a diet, who must monitor their blood sugar and perform insulin injections, bullying can lead to the interruption of treatment and monitoring of the disease. This is also likely to happen to patients with bronchial asthma (Sentenac, 2012).

Blood glucose monitoring, following a specific diet, or chronic administration of some drugs can lead to stigmatization and victimization. Children with diabetes mellitus who are bullied tend to think that negative comments are true, which can lead to signs of depression and anxiety, especially if the bullying keeps happening repeatedly. Moreover, the victims themselves start aggressing younger children, as a reaction to what has happened to them (Sentenac, 2012). Additionally, low social support can, in some cases, cause difficulties in the management of the disease.

In the long term, bullying and cyberbullying cause physical, mental, behavioural, and emotional disorders that can persist into adulthood.

*Bullying and cyberbullying of children with neuropsychiatric disorders*

Bullying is the most common form of violence among children and adolescents, affecting especially those with disabilities, who do not have the ability to defend themselves (Park, 2020).

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is “a group of developmental disorders characterized by severe and pervasive qualitative deterioration of the following areas of development: communication, behaviour, social interaction” (Anton-Păduraru, 2020).

ASD has an onset around the age of 2, but most symptoms become evident when they start school. These patients show insufficient social skills, lack of emotional control, misunderstanding of colleagues’ emotions and different social situations, lack of empathy, difficulties in communication, difficulties in interpreting social situations and the intentions of colleagues, misunderstanding of jokes and certain gestures, reduced interaction with colleagues, inability to work

in a team, failure to recognize malicious behaviour, and all of which can contribute to bullying (Humphrey, 2021). The anxiety level in these patients is high, creating a vicious circle between bullying and psycho-social problems (Park, 2020). Precarious socio-economic status can be a risk factor for the occurrence of bullying, as well as a consequence of it (Hebron, 2012; Robertson, 2013). Comorbidities present in patients with ASD increase the risk of suffering from bullying (Park, 2020).

Factors that increase the risk of ASD are advanced parental age, prenatal exposure to air pollutants or pesticides, lack of oxygen during birth, obesity, diabetes, or maternal autoimmune diseases, prematurity, and low birth weight (Humphrey, 2021).

Children with ASD are part of vulnerable groups (Robertson, 2013). According to Klin et al., cited by Humphrey et al., patients with ASD are perfect victims of bullying because, due to their behaviour, they are considered different from healthy children. The reasons why they are more frequently exposed to bullying and cyberbullying are represented by the presence of repetitive behaviours, poor executive function, poor social communication, poor quality relationships with colleagues, and a greater affinity for digital interaction (Hebron, 2017; Morton, 2019). Also, the male sex, young age (5-10 years), and the use of public transport or school buses by these patients increase the risk of bullying (Hebron, 2012).

Patients with ASD are subject to verbal, physical, and relational bullying, as well as cyberbullying, but verbal victimization is more frequent in those aged between 5 to 12 years (Park, 2020). The prevalence of cyberbullying among children with ASD is rising, and they have been using electronic devices more frequently, a special case being during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they attended school online.

The risk in students with ASD is 2.4 times higher than in healthy students, and two times higher than in those with other disabilities (Park, 2020). In their 2010 study, Humphrey and Symes, cited by Humphrey (2015), mentioned that the incidence of bullying in patients with ASD is three times higher than in those with dyslexia. Likewise, in the study by Kloosterman et al. (2013), it was mentioned that patients with ASD were more frequently victims of bullying compared to patients with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning difficulties. In the study carried out in the USA in 2002, Little stated that 94% of mothers of children with ASD reported that their children had been victims of bullying in the previous year, while in Carter's study from 2009, 65% of the patients had been victims in the previous year (Humphrey, 2015). Sterzing et al., cited by Humphrey (2021), found a 46.30% prevalence of bullying in those patients. In the study by Sreckovic et al. cited by Morton et al., 46-94% of patients with ASD suffered from bullying, compared to 8-42% in the study by Nowell et al. cited by the same author (Morton, 2019). According to Forrest's study, the incidence in patients with ASD was 50%, compared to 20-30% in those without ASD (Forrest, 2019). In the study by

Zablotsky et al., quoted by Kazee C.R., and published in 2014, 63% of children with ASD suffered from bullying in the previous years, compared to 30% of healthy children (Kazee, 2020). In contrast, in Pfeffer's study, 92% of children with ASD had been bullied at least once in the previous year (Pfeffer, 2016).

As a consequence of bullying, these patients show a negative emotional response, stress, and internalization. In the absence of appropriate interventions, these problems may persist or worsen during adulthood (Morton, 2019).

Although children with ASD should attend the same schools as healthy children, in practice, parents and even some teachers are reluctant. Attending school with healthy children aims at a constructive education and the development of positive relationships, but risk factors that can make them more vulnerable can still be present. In order to prevent the occurrence of bullying, many children with ASD spend their recess in the classroom under the supervision of a teacher. As a result, they become less active, more isolated, and they do not enjoy attending school (Robertson, 2013). The imbalance in communication and social skills between healthy children (possible aggressors) and those with ASD (possible victims) increases the risk of bullying and cyberbullying (Park, 2020). Cyberbullying is more common outside of school (Lindsay, 2011).

Emotional bullying is more common in children with ASD. In a study conducted in the UK in 2002, one-third of ASD patients had not been invited to any birthday parties in the previous year, and many had had dinner alone. The study by Symes and Humphrey (2010) showed that kids with ASD were more likely to be rejected and less likely to be accepted by their peers (Peterson, 2013).

In the study by Reid&Batten (2006), entitled "Bullying is Bullied", 83% of parents of children with ASD stated that their children's self-image suffered, that 63% of them presented mental disorders, and others self-aggression as a consequence of bullying, the most negative effects being recorded in those aged between 16 and 19 years. Furthermore, in the study by Wainscot et al., (2008), 87% of children with ASD were bullied at least once a week (Robertson, 2013).

Just like patients with ASD, bullying is also common in those with ADHD. Children and adolescents with ADHD present an increased risk of victimization, both through exposure to bullying (physical, verbal, relational) and through exposure to cyberbullying (Sentenac, 2012). Therefore, pain, depression, internalization, psychotic manifestations, school absenteeism, and even suicide attempts are frequently encountered among them. Another consequence of bullying and cyberbullying in these patients is social anxiety, that permanent fear of situations in which they could be exposed to unfamiliar people who would subject them to humiliation, insults, or criticism. Social anxiety can influence the ability of patients with ASD and ADHD to develop relationships with colleagues, often presenting the fear of being evaluated negatively by them. Repeated victimization through bullying and cyberbullying can lead to an increase in the degree of social anxiety (Liu, 2021).

Therefore, children and adolescents with ASD and ADHD require careful monitoring to prevent or reduce the occurrence of specific bullying manifestations. Different types of interventions, including cognitive-behavioural therapy programs, must contribute to the development of self-control, empathy, and assertiveness, to solving problems between different people, as well as to reducing victimization through bullying and cyberbullying (Liu, 2021).

Patients with epilepsy represent another category of patients at risk of becoming victims of bullying. The higher level of aggression among them is explained by the presence of abnormalities in the frontal lobe of the brain that are associated with deficient executive function, thus affecting the inhibition of aggressive behaviour (Pinquart, 2017).

Children with disabilities are more frequently victims of bullying, especially those with more visible disabilities, who are two times more exposed (Linsay, 2011). Children and adolescents with hemiplegia, diplegia, and cerebral palsy with motor impairment are often victims of physical and verbal bullying, including social exclusion (Linsay, 2011; Sentenac, 2012). In the long term, children with disabilities who are victims of bullying are at risk of having their mental health affected (Humphrey, 2021).

Increased bullying in the case of chronic patients can raise the risk of other chronic diseases (migraine, obesity etc.) (Pinquart, 2017). That is why, within individualized therapies or with a limited number of patients, they must be taught to recognize certain aspects characteristic of bullying, including non-verbal communication (Humphrey, 2015).

Extracurricular activities may help children with disabilities form friendships that protect them from both bullying and cyberbullying (Linsay, 2011).

#### *Bullying and cyberbullying of children with special needs and disabilities*

Cases of bullying among children and young people have increased exponentially, but studies on bullying among children with special needs or disabilities are fewer (Limber, 2016).

The following categories of patients with special needs or disabilities have a higher risk of being victims of bullying:

- children with dyslexia and learning difficulties,
- children with language and speech disorders,
- children with physical and sensory disabilities,
- children with ASD and ADHD,
- children with socio-emotional difficulties (McLaughlin, 2010).

Different studies mention increased rates of bullying in these categories:

- 83% in children with learning disabilities, 91% in those with different nicknames, 39% in those with speech disorders, and 30% in those with reading difficulties (McLaughlin, 2010).
- 84% of people with special needs or disabilities have difficulty making friends (McLaughlin, 2010).

The association of comorbidities with current disabilities such as ASD, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and dyslexia with ADHD/anxiety increases the risk of victimization (McLaughlin, 2010).

Children with visible or less visible disabilities are more vulnerable and more frequent victims of bullying compared to those without disabilities, especially boys. They can be subjected to different forms of bullying: verbal, giving nicknames, physical attacks, making fun of, threats, teasing, isolation, and imitations. Using different nicknames when addressing children with disabilities seems to be the most frequent form of bullying in this category of patients that can cause stress, as well as a lack of friends, and adults frequently underestimate the effects of nicknames (Carter, 2006). Patients with different disabilities can be direct or indirect victims of bullying. Direct physical bullying involves pushing, slapping, hair-pulling, kicking, and hitting. Direct verbal bullying involves the use of name-calling, insults, and teasing (Glumbic, 2010). 59% of children with speech disorders are subjected to physical bullying (McLaughlin, 2010). Teasing includes verbal abuse, ridicule, humiliation, gossip, rumours, and embarrassment (Hoover, 2003). In relational bullying, children with disabilities are ignored, they are gossiped about, or normal children are advised to exclude those with disabilities, creating a hostile environment around them. Moreover, they are perceived as “different” in terms of intelligence, physical appearance, physical capabilities, and social skills (Glumbic, 2010). Relational bullying is more frequent than direct bullying, but new forms of bullying (cyberbullying, sexual) are also encountered (McLaughlin, 2010).

Children and adolescents with disabilities may present attention deficits, memory and perception disorders, cognitive and speech disorders, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, poliomyelitis, spina bifida, coordination disorders, hemiplegia, Friedrich ataxia, as well as lower school performance (Carter, 2006; McNamara, 2017). Baumeister et al. (2008) cited by Laughlin et al. (2010) mentioned that it is not known which problem occurs first: the bullying or the anxiety and depression that lead to bullying.

The characteristics of patients with special needs/disabilities are represented by:

- learning difficulties due to which they are less cooperative,
- low self-image, anxiety,
- different physical appearances (hemiplegia, deafness),
- aggression, lack of cooperation,
- language and communication disorders due to which they are considered “socially incompetent”,
- inappropriate social behaviour (inability to control behaviour in public),
- overprotection from parents,
- low social status (McLaughlin, 2010).

The presence of the disability turns that child into a possible victim of bullying. The risk factors for the occurrence of bullying in this category of patients are male gender, older age/adolescence, lack of friends to play with, less than two

friends, extra help received from school or conflictual relationship between child and teacher, and severe physical and cognitive disabilities (Berchiatti, 2022; Carter, 2006; Falla, 2021). The presence of disabilities in parents increases the risk of bullying in relation to socio-economic status (Chatzitheocari, 2016).

The exposure of disabled patients to bullying has a negative impact on their well-being and health, and can lead to psycho-emotional disability, including suicide attempts. Highlighting the presence of bullying is difficult in this category of patients since not all of them are able to read, understand, and fill in a questionnaire, and some even require a language interpreter. Social rejection is frequently encountered in children with disabilities, and during adulthood, the risk of psycho-social problems is increased (Chatzitheocari, 2016; McNamara, 2017). The communication problems that frequently occur in children with special needs and the lack of understanding from peers lead to their exclusion from the group and social isolation (McLaughlin, 2010).

Usually, these children attend special schools, but recently there has been an increasing desire to include them in classes with non-disabled students. The inclusion of children and adolescents with disabilities in normal schools is associated with increased vulnerability, a greater number of bullying episodes, and the risk of social exclusion, as they are less strong and have fewer communication skills. Bullying at school affects not only the mental health but also the school performance of children with disabilities (Berchiatti, 2022). Another consequence is school absenteeism (McLaughlin, 2010).

Curricular and extracurricular anti-bullying programs for children with disabilities must be modified so that they correspond to their needs and ensure their counselling and monitoring. Braille books are needed for visually impaired patients (Carter, 2006; Hoover, 2003; McNamara, 2017). They should also be encouraged to talk about their disabilities and how to deal with bullying (Hoover, 2003).

For children with disabilities, it is necessary to develop special prevention and intervention strategies both in schools and in the community. Establishing friendships that provide support and acceptance by peers, along with inclusion in various associations, can be protective factors against bullying.

Language has an important role in the social integration of these patients, and the development of language and communication is essential in the prevention and “treatment” programs of bullying (McLaughlin, 2010).

#### *Bullying and cyberbullying of visually impaired children*

Bullying is more common among visually impaired children compared to children without disabilities. The results of various studies conclude that 86% of these patients were victims of socio-relational bullying, 64% of verbal bullying, and 21% of physical bullying (Ball, 2022). According to the study by Pinquart (2017) cited by Brunet (2018), children with visual impairment have an 80% higher risk of being victims of bullying. The risk also depends on the degree of visual impairment

(mild/moderate/severe). Even wearing glasses or having an eye patch, in the case of children with strabismus, can be a reason for bullying (Horwood, 2005).

The early onset of these disorders, the young age, and the association with other disabilities increase the risk of bullying (Brunes, 2018). Also, an increased percentage of children and adolescents with vision problems are subjected to bullying in physical education classes, either by peers (93%) or even by teachers (50%) (Ball, 2022). In the case of children with visual problems who play sports, studies have shown that they are more often the aggressor-victim (Danes-Staples, 2013).

The consequences of bullying in this category of patients are severe, starting from low self-image to low quality of life. Just like children with other chronic conditions or disabilities, children with visual impairments are perceived as “different” and of lower social rank (Brunes, 2018). Children with simple congenital ptosis are at risk of having their mental health and social relationships affected, which requires early psychological interventions (Hendricks, 2021).

For children who wear glasses, the optician must also think about the risk of bullying. Consequently, they should talk with these children, trying to help them to be less vulnerable, wearing contact lenses being a solution to reduce the risk of bullying (Horwood, 2005).

## **Conclusions**

Both bullying and cyberbullying are causes of psychosocial stress in chronic patients. Obese or underweight children and adolescents must be helped to cope with the difficulties caused by bullying. Therefore, inadequate nutrition can be a risk factor, especially in adolescents, for the occurrence of bullying.

To reduce the number of cases of bullying and cyberbullying among children and adolescents, especially those with various chronic diseases and disabilities, individualized multidisciplinary interventions are needed to prevent or reduce the different types of bullying (doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers etc.).

Bullying and cyberbullying must be prevented, and if they have already occurred, they must be stopped as soon as possible. In the case of these patients, screening is required to identify cases of bullying.

Medical personnel must teach children with chronic diseases and their parents how to recognize bullying and cyberbullying and how to react in these situations and to get involved in identifying cases of bullying and cyberbullying, by obtaining information, as well as in supporting the victims.

It is necessary for parents to monitor the activity of their children, especially those with various chronic diseases, and special intervention protocols for students, teachers and other categories of school staff need to be implemented in schools.

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# THE NEUROPSYCHOSOCIAL ELEMENTS IN CYBERBULLYING

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**Tim CARR**

## **Introduction**

Following the advent of modern technologies, which have brought new and wonderful possibilities for information distribution and communication, an era of the negative side of the internet has been ushered in. Understanding human behaviour and developmental psychology gives insight into why cyberbullying exists, and how it is the natural offspring of traditional bullying.

In certain settings, human beings have the potential to inflict (physical, emotional, mental, social, and educational) harm on others. Milgram's study, although controversial, gives insight into the capacity of human beings, when subject to authority, to lay aside scruples as to the morality of an act, and obey maleficent directions, with the thought that the responsibility is not attributable to themselves, the victim may in part deserve their fate, and they have no other choice but to obey (Milgram, 1963).

According to a 2012 survey in Northern America, women, ethnically Hispanic, 18–29-year-old, urban residents, with a household income of less than \$30,000/year, had a slightly higher prevalence of social network usage, with more women than men using Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, and more men using Twitter.

A relatively high number of those internet users were those in the non-adolescent age groups, with fewer users in each advancing age range (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). This would account for the disproportional distribution of reported cyberbullying behaviour among adolescents. According to a UNICEF report, 71% of youth aged 15 to 24 use the internet, compared to 48% of the population. A 'bedroom culture' of many child smartphone users fosters unsupervised, private internet use (Keeley & Little, 2017). With more children starting to use the internet at earlier ages (Keeley & Little, 2017), educational advantages are being overshadowed by the potential harm.

The prevalence of cyberbullying over time has increased, with an emphasis on low-and middle-income countries, and the emergence of cyberbullying across country borders (Zhu et al., 2021).

As cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon and field of research, many of the tools are constantly changing to suit the ever-progressing technological devices.

In 2014, a study on a large sample of 1,100 in eight mixed-gender English secondary schools showed cyberbullying perpetration to be relatively uncommon in the age range of 12 to 13 years (Fletcher et al., 2014).

Brochado and associates highlighted by metanalysis the flawed methodology by which cyberbullying prevalence is estimated, and the inconsistencies that make the interpretation of data difficult (Brochado et al., 2017). Nevertheless, among 439 college students surveyed, 21.9% reported experiencing cyberbullying, 38% knew a cybervictim, and 8.6% were themselves cyberbullies (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). Such significant differences in the prevalence of cyberbullying perpetration: 1%-41%, cybervictimisation: 3%-72%, and cybervictim-cyberbully: 2.3% to 16.7% among American middle and high-school students show a major flaw in the methodology. The poverty of the methodological process has been postulated to be a product of inconsistent definitions and methodology tools proven by evidence (Selkie et al., 2016).

## **Structure and Sociopsychology**

### *The group process*

Bullying has more recently been understood to be a “group process”, involving the victim, the defender of the victim, the bully, the reinforcer of the bully, the assistant of the bully, and the outsider, intrinsically connected with the stratified sociometric status groups (cliques): popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average (Salmivalli et al., 1996). In the group process, there is almost total involvement in one way or another by a population of children in a given setting, distinguishable by the participation scale method, which holds validity (Sutton & Smith, 1999). Research confirms the validity of the group process in cyberbullying (Sarmiento et al., 2019).

### *Deindividuation*

In the aforementioned groups, individuals, under the cloak of supposed anonymity, and the diffusion of responsibility, may experience the phenomenon of deindividuation, the restraints of typical social settings that would otherwise prevent someone from behaving in a socially unacceptable way. Misdeeds that would otherwise not be perpetrated are inflicted in hate against individuals. Recent research has outlined an integrated model which integrates the social identity model of deindividuation effects, experienced anonymity, and experienced social identity in the context of cyberbullying in social networking sites, which show similar patterns of bystander involvement, and moral disengagement mechanisms in harmful online group behaviour in those who are the “ring leaders” and those who follow and get involved in malicious online behaviour (Chan et al., 2022).

Often, personal inhibitions are limited to how actions may negatively impact the person performing them through consequences and fear of punishment (Mosher, 1965). It is the notion of the absence of consequence that leads to acts of

cyberbullying and internet harassment (Pettalia et al, 2013). The internet provides a place where people of similar ideas can potentially band together, and where socially intolerable views become the majority, and individuals no longer feel responsible for their own actions.

### *Disinhibition*

The disinhibition effect is a phenomenon most notably in those who visit the cyberspace in which individuals experience or perceive: dissociative anonymity *{perception of the ability to hide or modify one's identity within the cyberspace (Mueller-Coyne et al., 2022)}*, dissociative imagination *{immersive concentration to a given stimulus to the neglect of surrounding reality, and detachment of the virtual and imaginary from reality (Bregman-Hai et al., 2018)}*, solipsistic introjection *{a term coined by John Suller, which denotes the giving of a voice to written text, most notably in the online setting, as it is read, so that one perceives the conversation to be existing in their mind, and not with the other person (Suller, 2004)}*, asynchronicity *{the lack of real time interaction in the online setting in which replies are delayed, (Suller, 2004)}*, minimising authority *{equality and lack of social hierarchy on account of the online setting, thus a minimisation of perceived authority and responsibility to authority, Suller, 2004}*, and invisibility *{the absence of the sound of "footsteps" and the mark of "footprints", figuratively speaking which alert others of ones presence as they navigate through the social space (Suller, 2004)}* (Suller, 2004).

The Social Media Cyberbullying Model has empirical evidence to support it. Among a 1,003 adult sample population of cyberbullying perpetrators, intense usage of social media, plus anonymity expedites a process of negative social learning that heralds cyberbullying behaviour (Lowry et al, 2016). In a sample of 2,407 Chinese 11–16-year-olds, elevated online disinhibition levels were found to be linked to elevated cyberbullying perpetration, with empathy acting as an important moderator, dampening the online disinhibition–cyberbullying relationship to non-existent. Empathy showed significant reductions in cyberbullying perpetration in online disinhibition only in males, and not in females (Wang et al., 2022).

The implications of this are that those impulses and repressed desires of “self”, which are held in place by face-to-face social convention in the majority of the civilised population, are unleashed in a kind of cathartic manner by a repressed, stressed, frustrated, overworked, depressed, anxious, dissatisfied person, who is to some extent fed up with reality, and who engages with the virtual social space which provides for them an outlet by which one may live what they think to be their true self, uninhibited (to whatever degree), in the virtual world, and be detached from the consequences that may interfere with reality. With a cheaper reward system of a lower threshold of dopamine release and activation of pleasure centres in the brain than those activities requiring more investment and effort for a pleasurable payoff offered by reality (Cash et al, 2012), it is no wonder that more and more people are spending more of their time in the virtual world, and less time

engaged in social interactions with family and friends, and attending social events (Nie et al., 2002), predisposing them to Internet Addiction Disorder (Cash et al., 2012). While social interaction in the virtual realm may exist in video games, social media, and various online forums, each setting poses a potential platform for social interaction of a healthy nature or a harmful and abusive manner (cyberbullying). Because of such a tempting offer to disengage with reality (dissociative imagination) and remove as it were one's "belt" at the end of a long day and relax, much of modern society is signing onto the virtual world (Fang & Yen, 2006).

### *The Cyber-reality Bridge*

Following on with Suller's theory of the online disinhibition effect, the "true self" is not only that "self" projected to the world and inhibited in reality, but a combination of the "self" in the real world, and the "self" in the cyberspace, which may be inhibited to whatever degree of a spectrum of inhibition (Suller, 2004). Thus, as a person interacts in the virtual or real world, it is still them interacting, and the two manifestations are not mutually independent of one another, and what may impact their lives in reality (anxiety, frustration, suspicion) may filter through into the virtual world and vice versa (Suller, 2004). Specifically, aggressive behaviour experienced by an individual from someone in their family, school, or workplace, may lead to the victim using the virtual space (either consciously or unconsciously) as an outlet for their emotions (Gómez-Ortiz et al., 2016). Aggressive behaviour is well known to be transmissible from one generation to another through imitation. Criminality, on the other hand, is not transmitted through behaviour imitation (McCord, 1988).

### **Risk Factors in Cyberbullying**

Elevated levels of antisocial behaviour and lower prosocial influences from peers, being in educational transition, increased traditional victimisation and depression, all have been identified as important factors implicated in cyberbullying and cybervictimisation roles respectively (Cappadocia et al., 2013).

Research such as that of Obsuth and associates shows how aggressive behaviour is a predictor of reduced prosocial behaviour in the year following. However, prosocial behaviour was not found to be a predictor of aggressive behaviour change (Obsuth et al, 2015).

In a longitudinal trend, callous-unemotional character traits were found to be associated with cyberbullying, exposure to violence in the media, a risk for cybervictimisation, and cyberbullying. In a protective manner, social support from family was found to be a protective factor among youth who were victims of cyberbullying and who lived in a household with a single parent, in the absence of social support from friends (Fanti et al., 2012).

Traits such as narcissism, conduct problems, impulsivity, and callous-unemotional behaviour among adolescents were found to be associated with bullying behaviour (Fanti & Kimonis, 2012).

Longitudinal risk factors were also found to be related to traditional bullying, rule-breaking behaviour, and frequency of online communication in the likelihood of cyberbullying perpetration (Sticca et al., 2012).

A population-based study of 2,215 13–16-year-olds yielded further identification of risk factors of cybervictimisation: a family environment with any variation of two biological parents, problems among peers and emotional issues, perceived challenges, headaches, recurrent abdominal pain, difficulty sleeping, and a lack of a sense of safety in school. Cyberbullying, conduct issues, perceived challenges, hyperactivity, a lack of safety at school, a high frequency of smoking and drunkenness, headaches, and decreased prosocial behaviour are all factors. Cyberbully-cybervictim: all the risk factors above mentioned. Furthermore, of note, fear of safety was associated with cybervictimisation from a same-sex, opposite-sex adult, group of people, and unknown person (Sourander et al., 2010).

## **Bullying – Cyberbullying, peculiarities, similarities, and links**

### *Definitions*

Smith defines cyberbullying as “the aggressive, intentional action(s) of an individual or group through electronic media of communication, with repetition in a relatively short period of time to a relatively defenceless victim” (Smith et al, 2008). This definition closely mirrors the definition of what is considered traditional bullying: aggressive, intentional action(s) or behaviour perpetrated by an individual or group against a vulnerable (relatively defenceless) victim (Olweus, 1993). It may be safely inferred that cyberbullying and bullying share many common features and characteristics, making the understanding of bullying paramount to the better understanding of the still infant field of cyberbullying, which relies heavily on questionnaire-style reports, and lacks much of the empirically gathered data of similar fields of research (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). Neurobiology, together with psychology, provides a sphere of objective study from which rich data has been produced to help us better understand bullying and cyberbullying (see section on executive function).

### *Reporting to adults*

Victims of cyberbullying are less likely to report their victimhood to adults and to anyone at all (Slonje & Smith, 2008), leaving them in the dark, and potentially isolating the victim, exposing them to the negative mental health effects, even suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

One explanation for why victims are less likely to report may be found in the fact that research shows that victimisation at times is not positively improved by informing an adult and can potentially prolong bullying victimisation. The benefit of informing an adult appears to be in the victim’s level of internalisation (Shaw et al., 2019).

### *Correlations between traditional bullying and cyberbullying*

Cyberbullying both mirrors and parallels traditional bullying, in its definition, model of the groups (Smith et al, 2008), impact on an individual (albeit without the physical element), and the causes of bullying. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal relationships were shown to be found between traditional bullying in a school setting and cyberbullying, traditional victimisation and cybervictimisation (Fanti et al., 2012).

#### *Age*

The relative prevalence of bullying vs. cyberbullying in a recent study in northwest Spain among primary and secondary school students (Pichel et al., 2021) was found to be victimhood (cyberbullying victimhood) vs. cyber victimhood: 25.1% and 9.4%, bullying vs. cyberbullying: 4.4% and 4.3%, and bully-victim vs. cyberbully-cybervictim: 14.3% and 5.8%, respectively. These findings suggest similar rates of bullying and cyberbullying and overlap, but more than 2.5 times fewer reports of cybervictimhood than traditional bullying victimhood. Differences in victimhood among age groups were seen, with the mode (traditional) bullying victimisation among 12- to 13-year-olds, while cyberbullying victimisation had the highest proportion in 14 to 15-year-olds. In addition, increasing rates of cyberbullying with age, relatively younger victim ages in both traditional bullying and cyberbullying compared to perpetrator age (ibid) suggest the bullying behaviour is carried out on the younger groups who are easier targets due to power dynamics. Furthermore, older cyberbullying victims (adolescents) were more likely to have altered pictures and videos of them, while 12 to 13-year-olds were more likely to have rumours told about them (Ibid). These findings suggest an overlap and intersection between bullying and cyberbullying, and age influences the type of bullying behaviour perpetrated.

#### *Traditional Bullying*

Bullying is a form of youth violence on the part of “the bully,” while bullying on the part of “the victim” is recognized around the world as a bad childhood experience. The CDC provides a broad and comprehensive definition of bullying as: “Any unwanted aggressive behaviour(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth, including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm.” (Gladden et al., 2014).

From the above brief description, the following can be noted about bullying:

- It comprises negative behaviour(s) (as with all behaviour, it is learned and can be unlearned).
- There is either an observed or perceived power imbalance.
- There is repetition of the actions of this behaviour.

- Harm or distress is often the result, having the potential to impact every aspect of another human being's life.
- It is unwanted behavioural exchange between the perpetrator and victim.

The above points are crucial whenever looking at bullying, as through a better understanding of it, we are better able to prevent it, treat its effects, and apply the remedy at its very root.

While the heart of this text will be devoted specifically to cyberbullying, an understanding of bullying forms, the foundation of correct concepts, and saving strategies must be made. The terms “bully”, or “perpetrator” and “victim” will be used as descriptive and not as fixed labels, as the dynamic of bully and victim is far more flexible, and often an individual at different times in their life can be both a victim and perpetrator.

## **Bullying behaviour**

### *Early factors contributing to bullying behaviour. Maltreatment from Care-providers*

One could quite reasonably hypothesise that children who bully other children may themselves be the subject of mistreatment, abuse, and harmed by their own caregivers. By comparing two groups of children, 169 maltreated, and 98 non-maltreated, Ann Shields & Dante Cicchetti's research showed that bullying, while not being exclusive to the former, was more common in the former group than the latter, in a greater proportion, among those who were the victims of commissive violence (sexual and physical). Simultaneously, those maltreated children were at a far greater risk than non-maltreated children of being themselves victims of bullying from their classmates. Emotion dysregulation was shown to play an important role in the pathophysiology of both bullying and victimisation, distinguishing those who had bully-victim issues and those that did not. (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001). A similar study by the authors (Shields & Cicchetti, 1998) sought to study the emotional elements involved in the development of aggression among poverty-stricken inner-city children. The results of an investigation on a substantial sample size of 141 maltreated and 87 control (non-maltreated children) indicated a higher probability of displaying aggression, and a reactive violence risk was almost palpably greater among children who were physically abused. Emotion dysregulation, affective lability or negativity, and socially ill-suited emotions were the predictors of childhood abuse (Adverse Childhood Experiences). Being the victim of commissive violence (sexual and physical) from caregivers was shown to be associated with attention deficits, subclinical or non-pathological dissociation.

Positive interpersonal interactions are the bedrock of healthy social encounters. While each individual involved in any given social interaction has a widely differing background and upbringing, the effect of early adversity on

interpersonal interactions was investigated by showing that of a pool of 4,006 adults above 18 years of age each, early childhood adversity investigated was inculcated, and cumulative adverse childhood experiences were found to be a significant risk factor for the development of poor interpersonal connections, highly suggestive of emotion dysregulation as a mediating mechanism (Poole et al., 2018).

According to one recent study, care provider maltreatment and peer cyberbullying show similar patterns of maladaptive neurodevelopment in different regions of the brain (Lim & Khor, 2022), thus showing the impact of bullying and cyberbullying, being on par with parental abuse.

*Emotion dysregulation – the common denominator*

Emotion dysregulation appears to play an important role in the pathophysiology of bully-victim outcomes from early childhood adversity. A classic definition of emotion dysregulation is: “Patterns of emotional experience or expression that interfere with goal-directed activity.” The author Thompson (Thompson, 2019) postulates beyond the purely functionalist point of view of “goal-directed” to a broader, more fitting definition: “biologically dynamic, experience-based aspect of adaptation to environments and relationships that, in conditions of risk for the emergence of developmental psychopathology, motivates patterns of emotional responding that serve immediate coping, often at the cost of long-term maladaptation.” In the latter definition, the focus is shifted away from the expected (typical and “normal”) goal direction to explore the direction of attention towards which, in the context of maladaptive psychosomatic development, a child’s mind would be directed.

An emphasis is made on the challenges of negative affective state modulation by other authors (Samimy et al., 2022). The normal regulatory processes are those controlled both automatically and by volition in individuals who are able to achieve a diminishing of negative affect such as sadness, anger, disappointment, in favour of both long-term and short-term goals (Thompson, 1990). Thompson further postulates the role of emotion as a regulator of human behaviour, while simultaneously being itself regulated from a developmental point of view.

It became clear to the researcher (Zelazo, 2015) the similarities in the coordination of executive function via particular areas of the Prefrontal Cortex (PFC) pathways involved in emotion regulation. Those prefrontal cortex pathways involved in executive function, are also responsible for emotion regulation. These prefrontal portions develop in the periods of childhood, adolescence, and the beginning of adulthood. Thus, they hold powerful potential for neuroplasticity through outward influences such as those influences affected by parental education.

Researchers such as Whittle et al., (2016) demonstrated the impact of those negative behaviours and attitudes from a parent toward a child on the longitudinal

growth of cortical fibres using magnetic resonance imaging scans on 166 individuals aged 11 to 20 years of age. Exposure to maternal aggressive behaviour was found to be a predictor of linear age-related changes in the right hemisphere brain cortical development in differing patterns between males and females. Among males', but not in females' effects of maternal aggression on the superior frontal gyrus were found, the superior parietal lobe, and supramarginal gyrus. The effect was found to be an increase in volume with increasing volume over age.

The superior frontal gyrus is understood to be involved in higher cognitive functions and working memory. The posterior and lateral areas of the left superior frontal gyrus, hold a substantial role in working memory, being informed and instructed by the most superior level of executive neural process. In addition, the left superior frontal gyrus has its function in spatial orientation processes (Boisgeuheneuc et al., 2006).

The work of Koenigs and associates concludes (through the traditional neurobiology methodology of studying brain lesion patients against non-brain lesion individuals) that the superior parietal cortex plays a key role in the process of the executive information rearrangement within working memory (Koenigs et al., 2009).

The involvement of the supramarginal gyrus in tasks of language and verbal working memory has been demonstrated through repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation in phonological process procedural participation (Deschamps et al., 2014). (The involvement of those areas of the brain impacted by maternal aggression, all appear to be linked to working memory. Working memory is a concept describing a function of the brain in temporary information storage and manipulation for the carrying out of intricate cognitive tasks used on a day-to-day basis, such as language comprehension, learning, and reasoning. Its divisible elements include: a central executive system of control of the direction of attention; a "visuospatial sketch pad" for the reception; manipulation and processing of visual information; and a "phonological loop", vital for language acquisition (maternal and supplementary) via the storage and rehearsal of speech information (Baddeley, 1992). (A deep understanding of concepts such as working memory and neurobiology is beyond the scope of this text, thus information presented is purely for the purpose of presenting fundamental concepts which may be further studied in more expansive volumes dedicated to their respective subjects). Strong correlations exist between reasoning ability and working-memory capacity, while there are also contrasting factors of correlation between reasoning and general knowledge, and between working memory and processing speed (Kyllonen et al., 1990).

The interplay of the integration of brain structures in working memory and the correlations between working memory and reasoning ability and processing speed brings to light a broader picture of the neurological features that lead to bullying behaviour.

This has been confirmed by a study assessing problems such as emotional control (emotion dysregulation in the unhealthy state), inhibition (self-restraint of impulses or desires), shifting (adaptation of thought and subsequently behaviour to situations as they present themselves), working memory, and planning and organisation via a parental questionnaire (BRIEF-P), and non-verbal IQ at ages 4 and 6 respectively on 1,377 children. Findings indicated a correlation between issues with inhibition and bullying behaviour, victimhood, and being a bully-victim. Having a higher non-verbal IQ was linked with a lower probability of being a victim or bully-victim. Hence, highlighting the participation of executive function and non-verbal IQ in social interactions between children and the presence of victimhood, bullying behaviour or both (Verlinden et al., 2014).

## **Executive Function**

### *Executive Function and Emotion Dysregulation*

The very definition of emotional dysregulation (as previously discussed) is intrinsically intertwined with that of executive function. Executive function refers to the “self-regulation” skills developed in the formative years in “goal-directed modulation of thought, emotion, and action.” (Almy et al., 2015). The emphasis here is on “goal-directed,” which is a key component of Thompson’s definition of emotion dysregulation (see earlier text). Furthermore, these processes known as executive function are, in the childhood and adolescent periods, used in scholastic acumen most notably. Meanwhile, on the social side, they are used to mediate healthy social interactions.

### *“Hot” and “Cool” Executive Function*

Traditionally, executive function is measured by the assessment of three fundamental skills (which are also vital in the modulation of behaviour in human interaction). These are: shifting (cognitive flexibility), inhibition (suppression of impulses and desires), and working memory (Miyake et al., 2000). Progressing from this, sub-concepts of executive function (EF) have now been defined, namely: “Hot EF”, affective elements of executive function correlated with ventral and medial portions of the prefrontal cortex; and “cool EF”, cognitive characteristics correlated more heavily with the lateral prefrontal cortex (Zelazo & Müller, 2011). In other words, hot EF involves personal goal-driven tasks, whereas cool EF involves those tasks requiring logical and critical judgment. Executive function development is particularly important in those adolescent years of development.

Among a sample of 136 individuals 12 to 17 years of age, a positive correlation was shown between age and cool EF, whereas a bell-shaped distribution of data with age and hot EF was observed. As it is to be expected, scholastic success was found in those possessing greater cool EF abilities. Hot EF, on the other hand, was linked to emotion dysregulation (Poon, 2018).

As cool EF is more linked with academic performance, it is more readily studied in controlled conditions, and investigations more readily take the form of what is familiar to the child learning in school. Consequently, developmental analyses have shed much light on the way in which cool EF develops with age.

To answer the question, “Is executive function made up of divisible subgroups of cognitive abilities, or is it unitary?” Wiebe and associates undertook a study on 243 neurotypical children aged 2.3 to 6 years. Data revealed across the board, and across discontinuous variables such as gender, and SES, a unitary model was (figuratively speaking) one size fitting all. Interestingly, latent executive functions were found in girls rather than boys, with no difference between groups of socio-economic status. Whether the task given was thought to be assessing working memory, or inhibition, one cognitive ability was in fact measured. (Weibe et al., 2008)

A later study on 228 3-year-old children using a different methodology confirmed the validity of the unitary model (Wiebe et al., 2011). While in this age group, unitary and less diverse executive functions exist, in older individuals, ranging from 7 to 21 years of age, performing the Wisconsin card sorting task (WCST), shifting ability developed into adolescence, working memory into young adulthood, and working memory were most linked to successful performance of the WCST (Huizinga et al., 2006).

In a sample of 1,099 young individuals, aged 9.5 to 15.5 years, early maturation was associated with greater rates of attention skill development in both males and females. However, self-control ability was less in females with early maturity, compared to their male counterparts (Chaku et al., 2019). Studies such as that of Friedman and associates suggest a broader model of executive function involving shifting, working memory, and inhibition (Friedman et al., 2008).

### *Modern Notions of Executive Function*

Theories of executive function have evolved with time and research. Most recent notions on executive function postulate “the iterative reprocessing model” proposed by Cunningham and Zelazo in 2007, in which neurobiological evidence is used for the explanation of executive function, which involves more than autoregulation, inculcating the conscious element of information storage and processing via the prefrontal cortex (PFC) (Cunningham & Zelazo, 2007). Through a conscious increase in the frequency of reflective information reprocessing, on the neurophysiological plane, PFC neural circuitry hierarchy complexity increases within different areas of the prefrontal cortex from the four identified systems: “reversing stimulus-reward associations”, “conditional stimulus-response” pairs (which may be univalent or bivalent in nature), “higher-order stimulus-response” in task selection, which are interpreted in the real-life application into the quality of adherence to instruction and rule. The hierarchy of use is understood to develop in rates reflective of neurobiological development of the prefrontal cortex (Bunge & Zelazo, 2006).

Data shows time and time again that cool EF is more linked to traditional academic success, such as in mathematics, whereas hot EF has little to no involvement (Brock et al., 2009). In the example of mathematics, executive function skills develop most rapidly in preschool and early adolescence. During this delicate period, executive function can be impeded or improved by external factors.

#### *Executive Function and Cyberbullying, the all-important link*

A three-wave longitudinal study over the span of 5-6 months on 698 adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years from Spain found executive function (cognitive flexibility) to act in a mediating manner between cyberbullying victimisation intensity (outcome of depressive symptoms) and cyberbullying perpetration, with reduced projected cybervictimisation (Morea & Calvete, 2022). In addition, reduced executive function skills (inhibition, self-control, shifting) have been highlighted as playing a role in cybervictimisation, cyberbullying, and cyberbullying-cybervictimisation (Fernández et al., 2022).

#### *Executive Function and Intelligence Tests*

A study at the turn of the century (Ardila et al., 2000) showed that verbal IQ and full IQ tests have been shown to be insufficient determinants of executive function ability. Adults with high IQ and ADHD are more likely to have executive function impairment (Brown et al, 2009). Executive Function has been shown to be more important than IQ in mathematics performance and attention among very preterm children (Aarnoudse-Moens et al., 2013). In the adaptation of behaviour in autistic youth, Executive Function rather than non-verbal IQ played a more significant role in the adaptation of behaviour (Bertollo & Yerys, 2019). Another study highlights working memory as having the most significant mediating role between neuropsychometry and IQ among a gifted child population, postulating adult-important differences between what is understood to be adult and child intelligence (Arffa, 2007).

#### *Executive Function and Aneurotypical individuals*

The implication of abnormal development of both hot and cool executive function exists in the development of medical issues such as ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Developmental Coordination Disorder, and many other psychopathologies (Zelazo & Carlson, 2020).

#### ***Aneurotypical individuals and Cyberbullying***

In a sample of cyberbullying victims, smaller volumes of left lingual and postcentral grey matter relative to a control group, and caregiver (household) abuse group had a reduced volume of grey matter (areas linked with emotional abuse) in the left inferior frontal gyrus, bilateral insula, postcentral and lingual zones (Lim & Khor, 2022), regions associated with (in order of appearance in text) inhibition & divergent (*creative*) thinking (Zhang et al., 2016), somatosensory

perception for the body and integration of somatosensory stimuli with memory acquisition (Diguseppi & Tadi, 2021), motor response inhibition (Swick & Ashley, 2008), emotion experience and subjective feeling control, empathy and social cognition, risk-taking decision-making and attention (Uddin et al, 2017). With this knowledge, the reason behind the myriad psychopathologies and neurotypical development associated with bullying becomes understandable.

### *ADHD*

Emotional loneliness and diminished social self-efficacy belief were found in a greater proportion in cybervictim and cyber witness adolescent students with ADHD than those without ADHD (Heiman et al., 2015). Both traditional and cyberbullying victimisation were reported at high levels among individuals with ADHD and or Asperger's syndrome. Meanwhile, those with no affiliation with bullying were found to have improved physical and psychological health scores (Kowalski & Fedina, 2011).

According to one study, cyberbullying perpetrators were proportionately higher in male youth. Having combined-type ADHD and increased age was associated with diminished BAS reward responsiveness, higher severity of traditional passive bullying and internet addiction (Yen et al., 2014).

### *Autism*

In high-functioning autism spectrum adolescents, there was higher reporting of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization than in their parents, and victimization was strongly linked with depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Hu et al., 2019). With regards to prevalence, traditional bullying victimisation was considerably higher in students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) than their neurotypical counterparts, and cybervictimisation was comparable in both the neurotypical and those with ASD (Campbell et al., 2017). Another study highlights the important fact that those who have ASD (or ASC) are capable of understanding bullying and cyberbullying behaviour towards them (Hwang et al., 2017).

## ***Personality Traits***

### *Narcissism*

Narcissism (covert) was identified as being a significant predictor of cyberbullying and cybervictimisation. Covert narcissism, on the other hand, had no significant link with either cyberbullying or cybervictimisation, with self-esteem being a mediating factor between narcissism and cyberbullying (Fan et al, 2019).

Strong correlations between narcissistic exploitativeness and cyberbullying & normative beliefs regarding aggression, as well as normative beliefs surrounding aggression and cyberbullying were the outcome of a study among Singapore and Malaysian adolescents. Acting as a partial mediating factor, normative beliefs surrounding aggression led researchers Ang and associates deduce normative

beliefs surrounding aggression to be a potential mediating factor between narcissistic exploitativeness and cyberbullying (Ang et al., 2010).

The dark five: (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy) have been associated with sadism, meanwhile the big five (extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience) traits of agreeableness have been shown to be inversely correlated with the dark triad and sadism (van Geel et al., 2017).

### ***The Perfect Storm***

Taking into consideration the abovementioned notions, it is evident that from a psychosomatic developmental, social, and educational point of view, adversity in the formative years predisposes individuals to greater risk of home victimhood, poor positive social interactions, emotion dysregulation, aggression, and poor scholastic performance. From these things, it can further be deduced that the sum of these ingredients (in combination with other elements not mentioned), would bring about a state of chronic negative intrapersonal perspective, which may lead to devaluation of others who are deemed to be of inferior status to the victim, according to the pattern of negative, maladaptive behaviour learned from the caregiver-child (bully-victim) home dynamic. The needle of the compass of interpersonal interaction, no longer pointing to the healthy north, points to the opposite direction. Frustration may then ensue from repeated failed attempts at forming healthy social bonds with classmates and peers, poor scholastic performance, and discontent from the lack of emotional validation at home or at school, besides from the things that are universally held in high esteem as prestigious, glorious, or worthy of respect and admiration (such as sports and other competitive participation events). The frustration and discontent, in the background of emotion dysregulation, may be manifested as aggression, possibly because of the simple fact that no other example was offered to the child at home, thus in place of healthy behaviour being learned, unhealthy behaviour formed the foundation of the child's social interactions. The above conclusion may, with reasonable certainty, be drawn from the multiplicity of research pointing to this. While simplistic, this model comprises the elements previously stated. However, it does not make mention of the contribution of those opposing forces which act to counter the trend of direction to which the amalgamation of the elements mentioned would tend. Such things as positive figures either from family influences, friends or significant adults (such as teachers, counsellors, coaches) who are able to either become aware of the negative elements, and seek actively to counter them by positive introspective reinforcement (for example: encouragement, appreciation, kindness), and healthy social interactions; or as it is more common (due to the fact that the discordance and dissonance at home are so well hidden or poorly observed), these individuals, ignorant of the issues, through day-to-day interactions would almost imperceptibly impact positively the individual, giving them the tools to counter their predicted pathway of neurobiology that leads to negative behavioural formation.

## **Solutions and interventions**

### ***School strategies to prevent cyberbullying***

Sundry strategies and protocols have been proposed and implemented for the prevention of cyberbullying at school, but they fall short of effectively eradicating it due to the fact that cyberbullying often happens off-campus. The bulk of interventions consist of information dissemination and restriction (Diamanduros & Downs, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Albeit to some extent effective, they fail to strike at the root.

### ***Interventions that improve Executive Function***

The iterative reprocessing model (as previously discussed) has given way to a better understanding of the role of reflection in executive function, which can be taught and has the potential to shape the developing brain (Cunningham & Zelazo, 2007). Thus, tangible and quantifiable empirical evidence can be provided through research interventions to improve executive function, as it is so inherently interwoven with emotion regulation or dysregulation.

When turned to face the perspective of emotional skill promotion (emotional intelligence), interventions were shown to lower the prevalence of cyber-victimhood, with added emotional perception, regulation and satisfaction compared to the control group without emotional education (Schoeps et al., 2018).

### ***Computerised programs***

Among the numerous discoveries, some of the proven methods of improving executive function include computerised training such as CogMed ©, aimed at enhancing working memory through computer games (Cogmed, 2015). A meta-analysis investigating the effectiveness of working memory training interventions has concluded a mere short-term improvement in working memory, and a lack of generalisability (Melby-Lervåg & Hulme, 2013).

### ***Aerobic Exercise***

Among older adults, regular aerobic exercise has been shown to improve executive function skills such as selective attention, inhibition, working memory, and shifting (Guiney & Machado, 2012). In older adult women (60–75 years of age), cognitive processing speed in mentally taxing tasks was enhanced with moderate and vigorous aerobic exercise (Peiffer et al., 2015). Another study also on women revealed that not only aerobic exercise, but also strength exercise has the potential to improve executive function (Alves et al., 2012). A more recent study suggests that light aerobic exercise has a role in cortical excitability modulation and particular executive function tasks, with potential ramifications for those who struggle to multitask (Morris et al., 2020). Among children, however, (from a group-randomised control group sample of 181 10- to 12-year-olds), it was shown that cognitively engaging in physical activity that is chronic and not acute, aerobic exercise impacts positively executive function (Schmidt et al, 2015).

### *Parenting*

It was proven that beneficial parenting promoted prefrontal cortex growth acceleration (Almy et al., 2015). Among children with shortened corpus callosum from infancy, inhibition difficulties were diminished by positive discipline parenting (Kok et al., 2014).

In the context of rioting behaviour, researchers investigated the parental role and found that character is the most important determinant of how one would act in the split second of a moment of deciding the right thing to do (Hughes & Ensor, 2014), more specifically, self-discipline, deference of gratification, resilience in the face of adversity, and application. Home is the best and primary environment for these important traits to be educated. Hence, those traits and aspects of parenting frequently given the least importance have the greatest bearing on the outcome of those decisions that shape an individual's life and a society's trajectory.

Not only mothers are important in parenting, but as positive fatherly parenting also positively impacts preschool-aged children's executive function, whereas controlling parenting styles reduce executive function (Meuwissen & Carlson, 2015). Combined mother-and-father parenting with father-figure support has been shown to be beneficial from early to mid-childhood (Meuwissen & Englund, 2016).

### *Religion*

Recent research has brought to light, through a longitudinal three-wave study, a positive association between religiousness and emotion regulation, but not with executive function. The implication of this is that both executive function and emotion regulation (which are so closely united on a neurobiological and psychological basis) were linked with lower risk-taking behaviour, with emotion regulation acting as a mediating factor between religiousness and risk-taking behaviour (Holmes et al, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

By improving executive function, the child is essentially equipped with the tools necessary not only to prevent those unwanted behaviours, but also to encourage healthy behaviours. Through the healthy development of emotion regulation, an individual in a safe environment with good social interactions at home, in school, and online has the resources, the feeling of safety, and the emotional intelligence to not perpetrate bullying of any nature. When they find a bystander with an indirect or direct role in the bullying, or as a victim, they would know how to act to inhibit wrong impulses, how to control their emotions, organise their thoughts, and strategize. They become aware of themselves, and prioritise the safety of those around them, with the working memory to remember these skills and act in a calm manner and in conjunction with responsible adults who not only listen, but also act and implement to prevent further perpetration,

not focusing only on consequences, but also understanding the fragile minds of all parties involved and taking an individual, tailored approach.

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# HEALTH PROBLEMS IN CHILDREN SUFFERING FROM CYBERBULLYING

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Cyberbullying has become an important health concern among adolescents in Romania and worldwide, and the phenomenon requires more studies to evaluate the complete dimension of the problem. The phenomenon of cyberbullying is continuously growing because of the rapid expansion of information and communication technology worldwide.

Data from the literature suggest that cyberbullying poses a threat to adolescents' health and well-being, and some studies demonstrated a direct relationship between adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying and negative health indices. Adolescents who are victims of cyberbullying report increased medical problems, psychological problems, even suicidal behaviour, and frequent somatic symptoms.

Nowadays, the internet has turned from an "extra" tool in everyday communication (cyber utilization) to a "primary and necessary" mode of communication for the young generation and an integrated part of their lives (cyber immersion) (Englander, 2012). Adolescents, in particular, use the internet and social networks like Facebook, MySpace, Instagram, LinkedIn, Viadeo, Flickr, Pinterest, YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp, and TikTok for a variety of reasons, including initiating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, entertainment, finding all kinds of information, including that for personal use, or for academic purposes (Dissanayake, 2014). The Internet may provide a bridge for vulnerable adolescents, giving them instant access to social networks, and providing the anonymity to create any identity they want (Daine et al., 2013). On the other hand, the internet not only provides support for daily activities but also creates an environment where dangerous behaviour is normalized and encouraged. The freedom afforded by online discussion and activity is directly correlated to the potential for the internet to exert positive and/or negative effects on users' psychological health (Durkee et al., 2011).

## **General data**

The definition of cyberbullying is hurting a person using information and communication technologies. This may include sending harassing messages (via telephone, email, or social media), posting disparaging comments in relation to a person's activity on a social networking site, posting humiliating pictures or

videos, or any attempt of threatening or intimidating someone using electronic methods (Hinduja et al., 2009). In most cases, cyberbullying is expressed via email, instant messaging, social networks, and chat rooms. The aim of cyberbullying is to cause harm, humiliation, fear, and despair to the victim. This behaviour must occur repeatedly and systematically against someone who is unable to defend himself/herself, and that is why paediatric population is at risk (Bottino et al., 2015). In cyberbullying, the aggressor avoids face-to-face contact with victims and achieves greater intimidation by having that behaviour anytime and anywhere, unlike traditional bullying that only occurs in school (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2014). Interestingly, adolescents who, in the non-virtual real world, are unlikely to become victims as they were able to respond in person, may be more vulnerable online through cyberbullying, where aggressors may not be identified, and are possibly harassed in a way that they would not be face-to-face.

Cyberbullying victimization tends to occur later than traditional types of bullying, at around the age of 14 years of age, in the adolescent period, when children spend more time on their mobile phones and social networking sites or browsing the internet. Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and young adulthood, consisting of multidimensional transformations such as biological, psychological, cognitive, and social transformation. From a medical perspective, maturation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-gonadal axis marks both puberty and adolescence (Wiguna et al., 2012).

The definition of cyberbullying is not uniformly accepted but, in general, it includes related terms such as internet bullying, online bullying, information communication technologies, and internet harassment. Most of the publications and authors have defined traditional bullying and cyberbullying as two distinct phenomena, while others have suggested that they are similar.

Communication is more and more orientated to online communication for the younger generation, and the classical “face-to-face” mode of communication is considered “old fashion” among their age group. This mode of communication has created a unique and potentially harmful pattern for social relationships—a pattern that has recently been explored in the literature as cyberbullying and internet harassment (Nixon, 2014).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is a relatively new type of bullying and has come to be accepted and expected among groups of adolescents since many of them are dealing with it personally, in their group of friends, or are aware of the possibility of experiencing this type of interaction. Studies show that between 20% and 40% of adolescents will experience at least one episode of cyberbullying during their adolescence, and more than half of them report previous experience with bullying at school (Mitchell et al., 2014). On the one hand, cyberbullying is more stressful than traditional bullying, because it is directly related to the anonymity of aggression; on the other hand, because targets of cyberbullying are less likely to know their aggressors.

There is a scale for cyberbullying developed by Patchin and Hinduja in 2009 that can be used. This scale unifies six different forms of online bullying in order to evaluate the level of exposure of the victims. These types of online bullying, according to this scale, are:

- being called mean names, or teased in a hurtful way
- being sent rude messages or pictures
- being left out or ignored by a group of friends
- spreading lies or rumours about someone
- distributing online messages, photos, or videos about someone
- being threatened through communication technologies (cell phones, computers, email, and the Internet)

The awareness of cyberbullying as an important health problem has, in part, been driven by some reports on media that suggested the connection between cyberbullying and adolescent suicides. In the beginning, the publication of cyberbullying focused on documenting prevalence rates, different sex-related effects, and identifying similarities or differences to other types known as classical forms of bullying (Nixon, 2014). Nowadays, reports, including those from the medical literature, are focusing on presenting different psychosomatic effects of cyberbullying (for example, headaches, stomachaches, abdominal pain syndrome etc.) along with the psychosocial effects (depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, anorexia, bulimia, sleep disorders etc.).

There are some differences between adolescents' reactions to cyberbullying, depending on the form of cyberbullying to which they are exposed. Emotional reactions are different when the child is being bullied online than when they are being bullied via cell phone. Some studies have shown that the negative impact of cyberbullying when using computer tools (for example, online posts, pictures, emails) are more harmful to adolescents than via mobile phone (for example, text messaging and phone calls) (Fredstrom et al., 2011). Children exposed to cyberbullying experience first some social problems before any medical problems appear. For instance, they experience feelings of loneliness, isolation, and helplessness; they have fewer friendship and relationship problems (Schenk et al., 2012); they lose trust in others, including friends and family members; they have increased social anxiety and lower self-esteem (Wigderson et al., 2013).

### **Cyberbullying and suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts**

Multiple publications have studied the association between cyberbullying and the suicidal ideation or suicidal behaviour in children (from middle school children to high school adolescents). In 2009, Hinduja conducted a study among middle school students in the USA, with the aim of studying the relationship between involvement in cyberbullying (either as a victim or as aggressor) and the rate of suicidality in the group. The results revealed that both targets and aggressors involved in cyberbullying were more likely to have suicidal ideation, or

even attempt to commit suicide. This correlation was found to be stronger for the victims of cyberbullying than for the aggressors involved.

The same results were published in another article by Klomek et al. in 2008. In this study, the focus was on the relationship between cybervictimization, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts. In the study group of high school students, cyberbullying victimization was related to increasing the depressive affect and suicidal behaviour. In fact, cyberbullying contributed to adolescents' depressive symptomology and suicidal ideation over and above their sex and involvement in traditional forms of bullying (for instance, face-to-face bullying) (Bonanno et al., 2013). The same study by Bonanno in 2013 concluded that adolescents' involvement in cyberbullying was a stronger predictor of suicidal ideation than it was for depressive symptomology. This unexpected conclusion was correlated to the fact that adolescents who are victims of cyberbullying might experience a loss of hope because of the permanent and open access nature of the computer, along with the perceived lack of control and anonymity involved. That is why they feel hopeless about their problems, and the suicidal ideation appears. Negative emotions, loneliness, and psychological distress were also identified as mediators in the relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation among victims (Kim et al., 2020).

Another important correlation was found between suicidal ideation and violent behaviour. Adolescents that are harassed online are more likely to use alcohol, drugs, and have violent behaviour in school (Ybarra et al., 2007).

It was demonstrated that involvement in physical violence in the past predicted increased adolescent suicidal behaviour related to cyberbullying (Litwiller et al., 2013). The positive association between violent behaviour and suicidal behaviour emphasizes the need for a complex team to be involved in managing the problem of cyberbullying. This team must include teachers, parents, healthcare professionals, mentors, and other specialists that are willing to apply effective strategies in response to cyberbullying.

### **Cyberbullying and somatization problems**

Another important health problem related to cyberbullying is the somatization process that appears. There are a few reports in the English literature about the effect of cyberbullying on adolescents' physical health. The purpose of these studies was to establish if there is a positive relationship between cyberbullying and psychosomatic medical problems. Data from the 1999–2000 Youth Internet Safety Survey show that depressive symptoms are significantly related to online harassment, and 13.4% of cyberbullying victims reported having suffered one or more symptoms of major depression, including functional impairment in at least one area (school or work, personal hygiene, or self-efficacy), without developing major depression (Bailin et al., 2014).

Another study found out that victims of cyberbullying experienced more severe forms of psychological problems (for example, anxiety, depression, and suicidal

behaviour) and physical health problems (for example, sleeping problems, headache, poor appetite, and skin problems) (Kowalski et al., 2013). The most severe psychosomatic symptoms were difficulty sleeping, stomachaches, headaches, and a lack of appetite reported by adolescents that were both victims and aggressors involved in cyberbullying (Beckman et al., 2012).

It is unclear from the literature whether there are any significant differences between male and female teenagers when it comes to the consequences of cyberbullying on these two groups. Some studies found no sex differences in prevalence rates of cyberbullying (Hinduja et al., 2009, Kowalski, 2013), whereas other studies found higher prevalence rates in girls (Låftman et al., 2013). The reason for the higher prevalence rate of cybervictimization among females compared to males is that young girls are more likely to be online for social networking, whereas young boys are more likely to be online for gaming, which protects the boys from being involved. That is why girls are more likely to become victims of cyberbullying. Additionally, the differences in online behaviour must be considered, because girls who spend a lot of time social networking have more opportunities than boys to be exposed to and involved in cyberbullying. Still, more research is needed before we can clearly conclude what the role of sex differences is in becoming a victim of cyberbullying.

All these studies concluded that for a child who is a target of cyberbullying there is a positive association with poorer physical health parameters. This conclusion is important to be known by the healthcare workers who are often in the frontline, responding to adolescents' somatic medical problems. There is also an increasing need for these professional health workers to be adequately trained in the area of cyberbullying. An important direction for improving the health indices of this age group is to develop some screening programs which are effective for psychological and physical health issues related to cyberbullying experiences. Another future direction is for universities' medical teaching programs and residency programs to consider tutoring students in digital networking or online social networking to increase the community's knowledge regarding the health problems correlated to cyberbullying (Sivashanker, 2013).

### **Self-harm behaviours and cyberbullying**

Adolescents that are victims or aggressors involved in cyberbullying have an increased risk of self-harm behaviours. Self-harm behaviour is defined as an intentional act of nonfatal self-injury or self-poisoning, regardless of intent or motivation. Self-harm usually begins and becomes most frequent between the ages of 13 and 15 years, particularly in girls, because adolescence is usually a time of physiological changes, with high levels of stressful circumstances, developmental issues, and psychopathology.

Victims of self-harm behaviour such as self-cutting or self-burning will need specialized medical assistance in most of the cases. Still, the incidence of self-harm behaviour is bigger than the one reported by paediatric hospitals, because not all

of these traumatic events will need medical assistance in a hospital. Many cases are treated by a general practitioner, by a nurse, or at home by a friend or a family member. According to Madge et al. (2008), only one out of every eight self-harm traumatic events is actually recorded. This behaviour is correlated to many of the psychological problems that appear first, along with the process of cyberbullying. In fact, self-harm in adolescents is considered not an accidental event but the ending point of a complex process involving personality, social, cultural, and health factors.

Self-harm behaviours refer to that type of behaviour which leads to self-injury in children but without any suicidal ideation or intent (Peng Z et al., 2019). One of the causes of self-harm behaviour in adolescents is being exposed to suicide or self-harm-related material on the internet. There are very few studies that have investigated risk factors and protective factors that influence the impact of cyberbullying on self-harm behaviour in children.

One important category of risk factors that has been analysed is pre-existing mental health disorders, disabilities, or conditions. For instance, children with ADHD who are cyberbullied are more likely to report suicidal ideation and non-suicidal self-harm behaviour (Wright et al., 2020). Another risk factor was the level of stress induced by cyberbullying in different individuals. Adolescents who experienced a high level of stress were three times more likely to report suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviour. Others reported a positive correlation between the frequency and the level of cyberbullying and the level of suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviours. On the other hand, some individual characteristics of children were considered as potential risk factors. For instance, having a different sexual orientation, a different ethnic or racial identity, being overweight or obese were identified as risk factors for self-harm behaviour even though stigmatization could have also had a role in this process (Muhammad et al., 2018). Moderate or severe addiction to the internet was associated with an increased risk for self-harm behaviour (Lam et al., 2009), and increased levels of other addiction were related to increased depression and suicidal ideation (Kim et al., 2020).

Other risk factors were: the frequency of cyberbullying in a time frame, use of the Internet for 3 to 5 or more hours per day, use of instant messaging, excessive use of online gaming, publication of personal information using a webcam, the negative emotions induced in different victims, relational difficulties with schoolmates and relatives, the level of perceived stress, the level of psychological distress, gender (usually female gender is a risk factor), the presence of intellectual or developmental disorders, substance abuse, previous or current experiences of traditional bullying, poor academic performance.

Unlike risk factors, the protective factors for self-harm behaviour are less studied in the literature. There are some reports that underline the importance of school relationships with an adult or with colleagues for the onset of self-harm behaviour (Wang et al., 2018). Another category of protective factors are the characteristics of familial relationships that can be found in the background of

adolescents. For instance, for some children in one study, a more restrictive style of parenting (more authoritative parenting) was found to be a protective factor and was associated with less suicidal ideation and self-harm behaviour (Nguyen et al., 2020). This role of the restrictive type of parenting as a protective factor has to be considered according to cultural differences between different groups of cybervictims from different countries. On the other hand, we can find very little information about the importance of proximal family factors, like parental pattern for education and for family life, to gain further understanding of the possible pathways to self-harm. Nevertheless, it seems that more parental concentration among adolescents who had experienced cyberbullying was associated with a lower likelihood of suicidal ideation and planning, compared with those with no experience (Nguyen et al., 2020).

In another study, other protective factors were satisfaction with family life, with classmates, and with academic results that positively influenced the relationship between cyberbullying and self-harm behaviour and suicidal ideation (Chang et al., 2019). It is important to notice that for adolescents, the reaction to cyberbullying was strongly moderated by personal skills like emotional intelligence and self-control, and this ability is directly correlated to age. Other significant protective factors were the level of life satisfaction, especially with family life, having regular family dinners, having a positive connection with an adult at school, having a good connection network in school, having a healthy diet, and most importantly, having a strong parental support. Interestingly, almost all protective factors for cyberbullying were in fact similar to protective factors for other types of bullying in general.

A special mention of a positive influence is related to using internet forums. Internet forums are identified especially by the victims and are defined as virtual groups promoting the opportunity to talk about a specific problem, to develop relationships, and meet adolescents with similar problems, to connect with others and to seek empathy and support. Becoming a member of a forum can reduce the level of distress and can positively influence the rate of self-harm behaviour. Studies about the influence of forums found some evidence for reinforcement of positive behaviours, including congratulations on not cutting, support for efforts to not self-harm, and encouragement to see a specialized doctor for help (Smithson et al., 2011). A series of characteristics of a forum, like anonymity of membership and the level of knowledge provided for members, are very important for positive influence. However, there are some reports about the potential negative influence of certain forums in which self-harm behaviour is discussed in a routine and potentially normalizing manner (Smithson et al., 2011). This kind of forums can induce feelings of hopelessness and have a negative effect on self-harm behaviour and suicidal ideation.

Although many studies have identified a large number of factors associated with an increased risk of self-harm among cyberbullying victims, these factors are

counterbalanced by the protective factors for a large number of children and adolescents involved in the phenomenon.

In paediatric age groups we have to be aware of the fact that social relationships are determinant for proper psychological and mental development. Consequently, the impact of cyberbullying on today's young generation is directly correlated to self-confidence, self-esteem, friendships, and emotional intelligence.

Therefore, particularly for children and adolescents, if many of the risk factors are combined, this would significantly increase suicidal and self-harm behaviours. Additionally, if at an individual level, the cyberbullying is perceived as more severe, the negative consequences could increase, especially in those victims with pre-existing medical disorders like ADHD or other mental health problems. The impact of cyberbullying is one of the most significant negative aspects of the influence of the internet on self-harm behaviour in children and adolescents. The mechanisms by which mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression, mediate the link between cyberbullying involvement and self-harm behaviour or suicide have to be explored by further studies.

It seems like a very difficult problem to deal with, but in fact, all these studies can be used as a trigger for all the factors involved in cyberbullying to introduce measures for reducing suicide and self-harm associated with this phenomenon. Simple measures, like introducing school programs that teach emotional skills, implementing family interventions to improve relationships, and parental support or even promoting simple habits such as family dinners or a healthy diet can contribute significantly to reducing the rates of self-harming or suicidal attempts. Even though nowadays modern trends emphasize adolescents' competence and need for independence, parental support still plays a critical role in leading children to the next level of social functioning and promoting their mental health (Moretti et al., 2004). All the protective factors for children and adolescents exposed to cyberbullying must be harnessed, especially in the presence of moderating effect of family support.

The importance of efficient measures for reducing the incidence of self-harm traumatic events and the rate of suicidal behaviour in children and adolescents is considerable since these two consequences of cyberbullying are public health problems for the paediatric population. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of traumatic death in the adolescent population after traffic accidents (Patton et al., 2009). Cyberbullying's involvement in self-harm behaviour should be considered by those responsible for bullying prevention (in addition to traditional bullying) for introducing teaching programs about safe internet use. All levels of education for children should promote the appropriate use of technology and the importance of reporting any type of cyberbullying. Gender-specific strategies for prevention and intervention may be helpful due to the differences in online behaviour between boys and girls.

It is important to remember that not only the school, but also the family and the community must be involved through specific programs. Prevention of

cyberbullying must be implemented in all schools, along with teaching programs for some practical aspects like getting online support for victims, or how to contact mobile phone companies and internet service providers to block, educate, or identify users.

Medical professionals such as doctors and nurses who work with children and adolescents and assess mental health issues or a traumatic event that seems the result of self-harm should routinely ask about the history of cyberbullying. The impact of cyberbullying should be included in the specialized training of child and adolescent health professionals (John et al., 2018). On the other hand, in schools, children and adolescents that reported being involved in cyberbullying should be routinely screened for self-harm behaviour and suicidal ideation. Teachers, parents, psychologists, health care professionals, and others working with children and adolescents must be informed about the complexity of cyberbullying phenomenon in order to make informed decisions for the benefit of children in particular, and society in general.

### **Cyberbullying and self-harm behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The recent period of the COVID-19 pandemic affected adolescents' mental and physical health, and in this period the possibilities for children and adolescents to be involved in cyberbullying have increased. Since most schools and public places were closed for a long period of time, adolescents were instructed to stay at home, social distancing was promoted during daily activities, and they began to study and socialize online. The time spent on the internet has increased significantly, not only to join classroom lessons but also to seek information for school activities, to connect with their friends and classmates groups through social media networking (such as Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, TikTok etc.), and to compensate for the lack of entertainment. Children almost lost the opportunity to have direct social interactions with classmates, make new friends, and participate in sports activities, as a result of this significant change in the day-to-day program (Wiguna et al., 2012). Those who were at the beginning of new secondary school or high school only met their classmates and teachers online, and also were forced to adapt to new educational styles (online learning, examinations, and group work).

With more and more time spent on the internet, adolescents may lose social support, face more psychological difficulties and all kinds of conflicts triggered by less personal space, because all family members stay at home. The physical health parameters were also influenced since they performed less physical activity due to restrictions on leaving home and due to discontinuity in performing sport activities. All of the dramatic changes during the COVID-19 pandemic have significantly contributed to stressful life events among children and adolescents, and increased the need for adaptative skills. Adolescence is, as we know, a difficult period by definition, since it involves hormonal changes in association with

fluctuations in emotional experiences, increased self-esteem, a sense of self-importance, and individuality (Steinberg, 2007). Along with that comes self-criticism, depression, anxiety, anger, irrational decision-making, and tenuous impulse control (Grootens-Wiegers et al., 2017).

All these characteristics, combined with the pandemic period circumstances, influenced the cyberbullying phenomenon for children and adolescents in general, and self-harm behaviour in particular. Several studies have reported that closure of schools and public places during the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative influence on adolescents' developmental milestones, and possibly increased the risk or exacerbated self-harm behaviour or suicidal ideation in some adolescents due to high levels of stress during this period (Ghosh et al., 2020).

This consequence of increased self-harm behaviour has been declared as a real threat to the mental and physical health status of adolescents during the pandemic period. Since the pandemic period is not over, the final consequences on children's physical and mental health couldn't be correctly evaluated. Even so, it has become clear from different reports that self-harm behaviour has become a major public health problem worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among adolescents (Carosella et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems that cyberbullying has become a significant positive predictor of adolescent self-harm behaviour, and this was independent of the total time spent on the internet. Another predictor for self-harm behaviour was the level of stress induced by the pandemic period. Adolescents had to fight two battles during this time: one battle to struggle to find their identity in a turbulent period like adolescence, and the other battle to try to understand what happens in a pandemic period, how they can manage a way out during this time, and how they can improve their social skills and become empathetic individuals. Stress was induced by disrupted connections with social context and colleagues, and this may have several implications for their mental and physical well-being. Similarly, the immaturity of the prefrontal cortex during adolescence may make these individuals significantly more vulnerable to various mental health consequences (Grootens-Wiegers et al., 2017). When we are thinking about the level of stress of these immature children, we have to be aware of the fact that during the pandemic, they experienced feelings of loneliness and social isolation for the first time in their lives. In those circumstances, they alternatively engaged in more screen time during their daily activities. The screen time exceeded 4 or even 6 hours daily, including time spent watching TV, videos or movies on YouTube, time spent playing video games, time spent using laptops, tablets, or iPads for browsing and/or social media activities, and time spent using smartphones. This prolonged screen time had a potentially harmful mental health effect due to a high exposure to false or misinformation, including that about COVID-19 or other age-inappropriate media programs. Many adolescents may have insufficient basic knowledge, understanding, and perception to assess the accuracy of this information, and this will raise the level of stress for them

(Hamilton et al., 2020). The cognitive processes that follow prolonged screen time for television, personal computers, or smartphones may trigger adolescents' feelings of stress, leading them to self-harm behaviour in order to successfully manage to deal with these uncomfortable feelings. The cumulative effect of prolonged screen time and the high level of stress can intensify impulsive behaviours toward other adolescents, such as domestic abuse, cyberbullying, and other high-risk and self-harm behaviours (Sharma et al., 2020).

The pandemic period is a serious global crisis that has been influencing every component of our lives, but most importantly, family life. In many families, due to lockdowns, restrictions to stay-at-home, home schooling and home working, social distancing, and financial difficulties, or the lack of access to health services, but also because the uncertainty of tomorrow, stress has reached a threateningly high level. For children, this meant facing a new, abnormal situation in which their normal life pattern was disrupted. The COVID-19 pandemic may alter adolescents' cognition, emotions, behaviours, and fundamental mechanisms due to limited access to their developmental needs (Wiguna et al., 2021). As a result, this may possibly increase violent behaviour and self-harm behaviour, sometimes in response to their parents' harsh measures. Problems of adolescents related to stress and insecurity of tomorrow, regarding the pandemic, may worsen the feeling of tension, and they may become violent toward themselves, due to limitations in their capacity to make decisions. Stress is well known for being associated with an increased risk of self-injury, particularly in the form of suicidal ideation and behaviour (Humphreys et al., 2020). Stress can be considered a primary mediator in self-harm behaviour during adolescence, and this became evident during the pandemic.

The effects of the pandemic on cyberbullying and self-harm behaviour are to be analysed in correlation to the type of parenting that children are exposed to, to the role of subjective feelings about COVID-19 in different families, and to previous mental health history characteristics.

The increased time spent on the internet appears to have both a positive and a negative influence on vulnerable adolescents during the pandemic. The high level of stress may trigger self-harm behaviour, whereas the internet provides access to violent content, and create a communication channel that can be used to bully or harass others. On the other hand, the internet is also used as a support network and a coping mechanism, and can connect people who are socially isolated, to compensate for the relational problems of the pandemic.

## **Conclusions**

In many countries researchers have proposed preventive measures like adolescent mental health programs that can promote strategies to reduce stress related to cyberbullying, abuse, and increased screen time. Adolescent mental health programs can be promoted through schools where adolescents feel most confident and spend most of their time, but in a pandemic period, such programs

may be conducted online. Examples of effective strategies to manage stress during the COVID-19 pandemic are the ones teaching active solution-orientation, stress resolution, conflict with stress, mindfulness, and a positive attitude, instead of holding back problems to oneself that can ensure adequate emotional control (Nock et al., 2009).

Efficient control of emotions, developing correct problem-solving skills, and creating positive emotions in daily life through shared actions using networks, and information and communication technologies, were very helpful to reduce stress during this COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al., 2016). Particularly for children and adolescents, psychoeducation programs may be developed in a very small group of classmates or friends supported by a secure environment to develop and promote tools for emotional regulation toward stress. Even for children learning from home, schools have a primary role in social support, encouragement policy, moderation, and offering mental health services and programs. This policy should be particularly focused on those children with existing mental health issues, knowing the fact that this will increase their vulnerability to stress.

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# CYBERBULLYING AMONG ADOLESCENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## **Introduction**

Cyberbullying means bullying using digital technologies. It can happen on social networks, messaging and gaming platforms, and mobile phones. It is repeated behaviour intended to frighten, anger, or humiliate the target audience. Examples may include spreading lies or posting embarrassing photos of someone on social media; sending annoying or threatening messages through messaging platforms; copying a person's identity and sending malicious messages to someone on their behalf. Face-to-face and online bullying can happen at the same time, but cyberbullying leaves fingerprints—records that can prove useful and provide the evidence needed to put an end to the bullying (UNICEF, 2020) and that cannot be retrieved entirely.

Nowadays, technologies facilitate communication with individuals by using digital devices, which have become a part of our daily lives. The progress of technology has put forward another context in which we can relate to each other, the virtual space or simply the cyberplace (Green, 2018).

Cyberbullying can be seen as a modern form of harassment that can be easily connected to bullying, namely acting aggressively by intention, and repeating this kind of behaviours over time. In this context, cyberbullying has also its own characteristics such as anonymity or struggling to disconnect from the cyber world (López-Meneses et al., 2020). Bullying is defined as a repeated form of aggression, physical or verbal, directed at a person or a group of people, in which there is a difference in power. This difference in power can be manifested either through something tangible (for example, based on appearance and physical features) or through the perceptions of others (one person is more popular than another, has more friends, or better social status) (Craig & Pepler, 2007).

The emergence of the Internet marks a decisive moment in the evolution of society by revolutionizing information systems, economic activities, and processes, but especially the human dimension, offering a new perspective on means of communication and entertainment. Along with the many advantages and opportunities determined by the development of the Internet, there are also a number of risk factors, which, if ignored, can lead to serious consequences. In the context of today's society, where access to the Internet has become a "necessity", we must not blame technological progress for the risks attached to its use but we

must be aware of their existence in the virtual environment, know our rights and obligations, and take measures when we are faced with this type of problems (Dobre & Enechescu, 2016).

### **Adolescents are more prone to experiencing cyberbullying**

Teenagers are seen as vulnerable individuals to cyberbullying because of their addiction to smartphones and socialization through the internet. Furthermore, the lack of permanent supervision of their families and the constant posting on the internet define cyberbullying as an important threat to the mental health of children (Armitage, 2021). When compared to the non-COVID-19 period, the prevalence of cyberbullying was lower and put on the same level with the traditional ways of bullying (Wolke et al., 2017). The lockdown of schools boosted the online activity of children and adolescents worldwide, which created huge opportunities for cyberbullying. Taking into consideration the amount of time spent online, traditional bullying was replaced by cyberbullying and has made new victims in the field. All these actions could be triggers that alter mental health, children's education, and social interactions (Armitage, 2021).

### **The psychological and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents**

In December 2019, a new illness by coronavirus (COVID-19) spread from Wuhan, China to all continents with 587,396,589 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 6,428,661 deaths worldwide (WHO, 2022). In 2020, confinement of the population and measures of social distancing were imposed, among which the learning process, which became an online activity and was seen as a way to control the spread of the virus. These measures were adopted by the majority of the countries, and until they closed, had important psychological effects on the population, mainly related to anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and depression (Huang et al., 2020). This period raised manifestations of psychological distress in children and adolescents, with a greater expression of external symptoms and regressive behaviour in children, along with anger, isolation, and depression in adolescents (Wang et al., 2020). When it was decided to continue with the educational system through online learning, one of the most important consequences was that sometimes the lack of temporal guidelines and physical activities based on daily life had a huge impact on teenagers, especially in the case of children and adolescents who were psychologically vulnerable (with mental health problems). Some experts have pointed out that without having to follow this type of routine, some children with depression have been locked up in their homes for weeks without wanting to eat, shower, or get out of bed (Lee, 2020). In this way, social relationships were interrupted for many teenagers. Those who developed severe psychological symptoms, within this population, were those who had suffered from school harassment problems before the pandemic (Tang et al., 2020). Some

authors have tried to identify the factors of risk and protective factors for those who are more exposed, such as teenagers. Among the main risk factors in adolescence we could mention: consumption of legal and illegal psychoactive substances; conflicting family relationships; lack of social support by the state; the influence of the media that prevents the development of critical thinking; being a boy; and having less faith (Páramo, 2011).

The effects of the pandemic can be seen affecting people worldwide. The lack of social activities in the real world and the lack of physical school activity have increased the rate of loneliness among adolescents, which is associated with mental health disorders, anxiety and depression, substance consumption, or premature mortality (Loades et al., 2020). The prevalence of burnout became higher since the start of the pandemic when comparing data from 2019 and 2018 (often lonely: 18.3% vs. 8.5%; sometimes lonely: 32.5% vs. 28.6%), and young adults were particularly at risk (Bu et al., 2020).

### **The worldwide situation of bullying and cyberbullying among adolescents prior to the pandemic**

A case study from 2017 shows that 19% of European children, aged 9-16, have been bullied online or offline, and 12% have been intimidated. The study emphasizes the gap between parents and children, which could lead to the underestimation of the risk to which children are exposed. Hence, 79% of parents from Romania, who participated in the study, were not aware of the fact that their children were abused in Romania, as well as the neglecting parents who exposed their children to high cyberbullying with their behaviour (Livingstone et al., 2011). Cyberbullying has the same features as bullying: power differential; the intention and repetition of the action; and models similar to bullying—verbal and relational aggression. Inclusion through the media and exclusion through the media are two additional features of cyberbullying (Grigore, 2016).

The types of cyberbullying that can be mentioned are flaming: sending derogatory/vulgar messages about a person; online bullying: offensive messages sent through electronic mail repeatedly; virtual stalking: online bullying with the purpose of intimidating the targeted person; denigration: sending derogatory false messages and posting them in the online environment; pranks: under a false identity, the abuser sends messages with the aim of endangering someone's image; the outing: disclosure of personal information said by one person to another or more people; and exclusion: blocking a certain person from a group in social networks (Grigore, 2016).

Cyber victims show risk factors related to psychological and individual facets such as: favourably against the bully prototype, high justification of cyber bullies, and feeling guilty. Regarding gender, the investigations report that it is a risk factor to be both a man and a woman. In addition, these are supplemented by low self-esteem and low empathy, being in a lower school grade with respect to the aggressors, feeling anger and frustration, having a history of mental health

problems, low self-efficacy perception, and low levels of body esteem. However, the risk factors related to cyber attackers belong mainly to the masculine gender; moral detachment toward the victim's situation; deceiving the consequences of their own behaviour; blaming the victims for their situation; having low levels of self-esteem; low level of empathy; alexithymia; and high levels of aggression (Marín Cortés et al., 2019).

## **Protective measures against cyberbullying**

### *Family, peers, and social aspects:*

One of the most important protective factors to prevent cybervictimization could be: open communication with the parents about the risks of virtual environments; using technologies of information and communication in a conscious way; counting on social support, especially maternal support; receiving demonstrations of affection from their parents and having had positive experiences in school. Considering that the family environment is the main protective factor against cyberbullying, one of the main issues is the fact that with the increasing number of relatives, or a parent who has migrated to other countries to find a job, the children are being left in the care of a single parent, grandparents, or fourth-degree relatives. But the worst is that sometimes they are left in the care of neighbours or friends, without any social protection (Buelga et al., 2017).

In a case of a group of children and adolescents from China during COVID-19 pandemic most of the participants in the study were not involved in cyberbullying activities, a low percent were victims of the phenomenon, and the lowest level of the participants were both victims and triggers. In order to reduce loneliness, resilient coping strategies have the role of mitigating cyberbullying. Peer relationships are the primary protective factors against cyberbullying. On the opposite pole, the higher risk factor was the age of the participants (Han et al., 2021). Parents are the first responsible people who should initiate their own children into the world of technology and guide them until they learn a set of rules. The family is the one who should supervise children and adolescents in the digital field and present this type of education to them. The solution should not be to ban access to technology, because it is dangerous, but controlled exposure could mitigate the negative effects. Moreover, quality time with the family based on warmth, understanding and respect, and attentive listening could facilitate fulfilling children's emotional needs, and become a protective factor against cyberbullying (Furdui, 2020).

### *Collaborative learning*

During the Covid pandemic it is suggested that girls are at higher risk to be cyberbullied compared to boys, hence the primary interventions should target this category of adolescents. One way to do this is to access cooperative learning through an online process in the same manner as physical methods address

traditional bullying (Armitage, 2021). Cooperation can be encouraged by group games, group activities, and debates. Teachers must be careful to allocate time in a balanced way for individual work and group work. Cooperative learning treats learning as a process that occurs at the individual level, but which requires social exchanges. It is very important for the students that their actions receive recognition and have social relevance (Weidinger & Borer, 2017). One method that could be easily implemented could be represented by counselling students with the main purpose to teach them coping strategies used in solving problems arising from cyberbullying for safe browsing on the Internet. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to adopt a curriculum that can specifically address the issue of cyberbullying (Furdui, 2020).

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, smartphones, selfies, celebrities, fake news, photo manipulation, cyberbullying, home viewing movies, and photographic projects are all becoming more prevalent in society in general, and in the lives of young people in particular. Both media consumption and production are very important for learning, leisure and building identity. Media literacy—the ability to use, interpret and produce media in a positive, productive, and socially acceptable way—has become a key competence in modern life, especially in the professional context, but also in the personal one. Learning by cooperation focuses on developing openness to others when students work together, on communication and debate. In working together, the content of the tasks can be understood to a greater extent, and students can develop more confidence. When working in groups, students feel what it means to be accepted by others and appreciated, for it means that team members share their knowledge with greater freedom (Weidinger & Borer, 2017).

## **Factors triggering cyberbullying**

### *Age, gender, and time spent on social media*

Loneliness was reported to be higher for students from middle and high school. As expected, education is a protective factor, but socio-economic issues, parents' job status, marital status, and gender could facilitate cyberbullying (Han et al., 2021). The use of the internet increased during COVID-19 pandemic and is an important predictor of loneliness and violent attitudes towards teenagers manifested as cyberbullying, physical and psychological health issues, or suicidal thoughts (Han et al., 2021).

There are previous studies that put this phenomenon in contradiction regarding demographic or psychological factors associated with cyberbullying. Some researchers claim that girls are involved more than boys in cyberbullying, whereas other researchers claim that boys are more likely to be bullies in cyberspace than girls. Another group of researchers claim that gender is unrelated to cyberbullying since both girls and boys are equally involved in cyberbullying (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). In terms of age, it looks like there is a higher incidence of

cyberbullying in puberty and early childhood than in adolescence, which gradually decrease towards the end of adolescence. Moreover, as expected, teenagers who spend more time on the Internet are more likely to be involved in cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). However, there are several studies which point out that in adolescence girls tend to take part in indirect actions of bullying, such as intimidation and gossip spreading (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

### **The Effects of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown on Cyberbullying rates**

The state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which imposed the limitation and the drastic reduction of human movements and interactions, in Romania also determined the closing of all educational institutions (formal and non-formal) and the transfer of the educational process to the online environment (at the peak of the pandemic, 90 % of the world's students were affected by school closures, and in September 2020, half of them were still not allowed to return to school). In Romania, closing schools and moving the educational activities online in March 2020 was perceived by all educational actors (students, parents, and teachers) as a justified, temporary situation, to which everyone adapted according to their own. Numerous measures were taken at the central-institutional level, different options and scenarios were tried, in the hope that school would take place in the best possible conditions, close to normality in which the threat of the disease was and is still present. In less than a month after the start of the new school year, the evolution of the pandemic imposed for the second time the total transition to teaching and learning in the online environment. By this time the expectations regarding the good functioning of the educational processes in the system online were much bigger (Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021).

During the lockdown, in-person violence at school was diminished, but cyberbullying was more intense worldwide due to the huge period of time spent in front of smartphones. Many studies suggested that the increased usage of time spent in front of smartphones is associated with this phenomenon due to the fact that several interpersonal relationships and activities are correlated with the time spent online. Furthermore, live gathering was restricted and the only available method of social activities, such as meeting new people, having lunch, or dinner were limited to the online social space (Shin & Choi, 2021).

For example, in a case study involving a comparison of adolescents' levels of cyberbullying from 2019 and 2020, it was suggested that gender issues, constant exposure to unfavourable content, friendship trustworthiness, and the relationship between parents and children influenced cyberbullying experiences to higher levels. In 2020 prevalent factors triggering cyberbullying were represented by being a male, risky content, friendship loyalty, lack of parents' and children's healthy interactions, and less involvement in school activities (Shin & Choi, 2021).

Other studies reveal that the most terrifying part of cyberbullying is the anonymity of the aggressor, unlike traditional bullying, where the aggressor is known from face-to-face interaction.

Furthermore, cyberbullying can be particularly threatening for children and adolescents who have had traumatic experiences or who have faced hard times within the family (Utemissova et al., 2021).

During online learning, physical and mental risks were associated with prolonged use of the Internet for children and adolescents, taking into account that on a typical day they spend on average 7.11 hours online (Velicu, 2021).

Other previous studies have drawn attention to the negative effects on the cognitive capacity due to excessive screen use: the decrease in critical thinking, imagination, creativity, and depth in analysing and solving problems, along with an increase in visual capacity leads to concerns about the effects of large-scale digitization of education. All these are accompanied by a series of risks related to the content that children access online. Among the most common risks demonstrated to be inherent in digital consumption for children are: access to age-inappropriate information and content; cyberbullying; sexual messages; hateful messages; extreme violence; contact with unknown people; addiction to social networks or/and games; theft of personal data; and problems of security of data and devices (Velicu, 2021). It is important to mention that numerous studies showed the increase in exposure to this type of risks regarding online education for children, during the pandemic (Velicu, 2021).

In these constrained circumstances, the role of educational institutions—teachers and schools—is diminished in the online environment, leaving parents and families solely responsible for preventing and mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic. For this reason, it is very important to be correctly informed about potential risks, and to be able to act in a positive sense. Research is highlighting the extent to which parents are aware (or not) of some of the aspects related to maintaining the health and well-being of children, and on the other hand, the influence that the socio-economic and educational status of the parents has on their perceptions and decisions regarding the online education of children in the pandemic (Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021).

According to other authors, moral disengagement and compulsive internet use are behaviours directly related to cyberbullying (Maftei et al., 2022). Subjects who are victims of cyberbullying tend to have more feelings of loneliness (Han et al., 2021). Another result was in relation to the comparison between the behaviour of adolescents and adults, showing that the compulsive use of the internet is more present in adolescence (Maftei et al., 2022). It is possible to reduce screen time per day, which, as a consequence, can reduce cyberbullying, and thus generate positive results (Mendes et al., 2022).

Strategies for managing emotions related to cyberbullying and positive attitudes can be taught in interventions to prevent this problem. The relationship between screen time, abuse, cyberbullying and stress can be related and/or

influenced by each other and they are all related to non-suicidal self-injury behaviour (Wiguna et al., 2021).

A new form of intervention suggests that IMPACT (Intervention Media to Prevent Adolescent Cyber-conflict through Technology) could be seen as a prevention method for this phenomenon. This method involves learning to deal with cyberbullying; preventing the problem from happening; and helping stop you when you witness a case of conflict. Subsequently, each of the participants downloaded the application that asked them daily how they were feeling and, based on these responses, some messages were sent to them, based on Motivational Interventions and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. In addition to the results, the reduction in the occurrence of cyberbullying having been achieved, the subjects who participated as the intervention group demonstrated improved mental well-being and less psychological stress compared to the control group (Kutok et al., 2021).

By not meeting the victim in person and not seeing the suffering that the aggression caused him, it is possible that the aggressor does not realize that his/her actions generated a reaction, causing him/her to lose the sense of continuing to carry out aggressions and to generate a decrease in attacks. (Mendes et al., 2022).

In one study in Brazil, almost half of the participants in the study reported having a profile on a social network. Analysis of the association between aspects of bullying (aggression and victimization) and cyberbullying (cyber aggression and cyber victimization) revealed a significant association between factors such as aggression in school, victimization in school, aggressor in cyber space, and victim in cyberspace. Despite the age group of the participants, between 8 and 12 years old, more than 80% already had some access experience to the Internet and almost half already had a profile on some type of social network (Cunha et al., 2020). The results indicated that, although aggression and victimization presented a significant association between themselves, both in the school environment and in the online context, this association was more intense in the online context. These results suggest that cyber aggression and cyber victimization are configured as a specific type of interpersonal violence and, even among children, it is not a mere extension of experiences of aggression and victimization among peers at school. Rather than representing the same behaviour in different environments, the school and the Internet, cyber aggression and cyber victimization seem to present peculiar dynamics also among children, either through access and forms of use, or through the actors with whom the child interacts in these contexts (Cunha et al., 2020).

Other studies emphasize that cyberbullying cuts back during the summer and increases when the school starts. Furthermore, all types of bullying are related to one another and tend to be at their lowest in July. The pandemic made it harder for students to address bullying to teachers due to the fact that they have less contact with professors, and they feel less comfortable when interacting online. By remaining remote, the students benefit from the apparent defensive effects of online learning on exposure to bullying, in all its various forms. Early concerns that the pandemic would substantially harm students' mental health (Golberstein et al.,

2020) have been partially but not fully supported by subsequent data suggesting arguably small increases in such measures (Kemper et al., 2021). The social distancing and public health measures such as social distancing, mask-wearing, and attempts to reduce the mixing of students across different classrooms substantially restricted the number of interactions between students as well as increased adult supervision. This kind of measures limited the unsupervised and unstructured time spent by students in large groups during breaks or lunch. Unstructured time is considered the one suitable for experiencing bullying due to the fact that students feel less safe (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). The author also suggests using Google Trends data which provides real time surveillance of bullying, offering protection for families and children.

### **Practical measures against cyberbullying**

The impact of cyberbullying on the mental health of adolescents could be diminished by preventive and interventional methods. Studies mentioned short and long-term interventions in the case of cyberaggression and cybervictimization for depression, anxiety, self-isolation, poor academic results, drop-out, suicide attempts and consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. These consequences can reach adulthood, determining difficulty in adapting to social, familial, and job demands.

It is important to identify as soon as possible and to intervene in cases of cyberbullying in order to stop the aggression and to diminish the risk of personal and social impact. Research showed that in the cases of both bullying and cyberbullying, the victim was not willing to share a new incident if the previous one was not conveniently solved. In other cases, if the victim is not receiving the expected support, she/he will try to defend herself/himself by becoming aggressive to avoid the intention of the aggressor. Another consequence could be self-isolation: the adolescent will avoid peers, friends, and the risk of drop-off increases.

Parents represent important key actors in the fight against cyberbullying. Parental model - how they typically deal with such aggressive relationships and, in general, in such situations; parenting - how they treat their own children; parental support - how they offer assistance in times of need; and parental control - how they reduce the risk of being exposed to aggressive incidents by controlling the time spent on the internet, the identity of interlocutors, and the online incidents are considered preventive measures.

Studies showed that victims are more prone to sharing the incident with friends or colleagues, parents, and less with teachers, principals, or other adults. These statistics must be taken into consideration in the case of any type of aggression by making adolescents aware of the importance of reporting and also offering support immediately in the case of bullying and cyberbullying by taking an attitude against the aggressors. In the case of non-intervention, the witnesses will offer the aggressor implicit support which will empower him/her.

Teachers can also offer their students a lot of tools to fight against bullying and cyberbullying by transferring knowledge about how to identify the signs of

aggressive behaviours, how to report the incidents, and how to recognize the psycho-emotional consequences of victimization. They have a privileged position (victims, witnesses, colleagues, or parents could inform the teachers about an incident), so they are obliged to act.

Schools, healthcare institutions, and stakeholders are also important actors for prevention and intervention in the case of bullying and cyberbullying by providing information about institutional rules and social rules or national laws. There are countries where these types of aggression are criminalized and some other countries where aggression is tolerated as a cultural dimension. Some studies also show that some adults consider that aggressive behaviours in online contexts prepare children for their future life in real contexts.

All the mentioned actors represent important sources for controlling and assuring the mental, physical, and social health of adolescents by intervening in cyberbullying. Especially during periods when online activities increase (during some periods of the academic year, during holidays, weekends, or critical times such as COVID-19 lockdown), preventive measures and interventions must be a priority.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic deepens the digital “segregation” among children due to the socio-economic and educational status of the family, which refers to the issue of how to use technology, how to handle the exposure of children and adolescents to the risks of online content, and the development of digital and cognitive skills. The excessive use of the Internet and the isolation, the social status of children in online school, means that most parents show themselves to be equally uninformed about the risk of affecting physical and mental health (regardless of their socio-economic and educational status). What is interesting (even if it cannot be satisfactorily explained) is that the parents from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to be more worried and also more aware of the risks and lack of physical activity on children’s health (Rodideal & Marinescu, 2021). The pandemic restrictions emphasized feelings of loneliness and maintaining well-being became challenging for adolescents, especially for the ones trying to manage emotional issues (Pfetsch et al., 2022). Moreover, communication could be misguided due to cyberspace and could generate unsuitable adaptable emotion regulation and could facilitate cyberbullying occurrence.

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# CYBERBULLYING, SELF-HARM AND SUICIDE

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## **Introduction**

Bullying, as a general notion, refers to a pattern of aggressive intentional behaviour, directed at a person who perceives themselves or is perceived by the aggressor as inferior (Eyuboglu et al., 2021) and unable to defend (Monks & Smith, 2006).

Traditional bullying has most frequently occurred among elementary school pupils (Bottino et al., 2015), and then extended to middle and high school students. High school students are, however, less prone to such behaviours compared to students from the other categories (Bauman et al., 2013). Traditional bullying behaviours include both physical aggression (such as hitting and striking with hands and feet, pushing, destroying personal objects) and verbal aggression (such as humiliation, threats, teasing, and insults) (Monks & Smith, 2006).

The rapid evolution of electronic means of communication, facilitated by advances in information and communication technology, has allowed the emergence and rapid spread of *cyberbullying*, a non-traditional type of bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bauman et al., 2013; Crosby, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2020). This new type of peer aggression is recognized as a major problem all over the world, and its consequences cause a high level of concern among parents, educators, and researchers (Bottino et al., 2015; Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying retains the mandatory and common elements of traditional bullying, i.e., actions or behaviours carried out repeatedly, voluntarily, and intentionally by the aggressor which cause real damage to the victim (Dehue, Bolman & Völlink, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Added to these—as an element of novelty—are the means by which the harm is inflicted: electronic or digital communication devices of all types (e.g., computer, telephone, personal digital assistant- PDA) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), which allow the creation of a variety of spaces in the virtual environment (e.g., email, chat rooms, instant message box, online voting booths, websites, social platforms) (Smith et al., 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Another particular element that distinguishes traditional bullying from cyberbullying is the nature of the damage caused by the latter, in the sense that the direct damage is psychological (compared to traditional bullying, where the direct damage is most often physical) (Dehue et al., 2008).

The aggressor can be both an individual and a group of people created in the online environment (Eyuboglu et al., 2021). The aggressor's intent depends on how he/she carries out the cyberbullying actions or behaviours. Thus, when

cyberbullying is carried out publicly, the aggressor intends to humiliate the victim, make them feel embarrassed, and when it takes place in the private environment, the intention is to induce the victim fear, suffering, anger, and despair (Smith et al., 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Unlike traditional bullying, where a major aspect is the power difference (real or perceived as such) between the victim and the aggressor, the online environment eliminates this imbalance and replaces it with reciprocal behaviour, which explains the identification of a strong connection between the two, up to the situation where a person becomes both victim and aggressor (Bauman et al., 2013).

The research interest on traditional or school bullying dates back slightly before the '90s and the first article on cyberbullying identified in the PubMed database was published in 2006 (Thomas, 2006). However, research on the specific manifestations of the phenomenon that was to be called "cyberbullying" precedes the publication of the first paper on this topic. For example, a study conducted in 2004, which included middle school students, showed that more than half of them (about 60%) had received "mean and hurtful" messages via the Internet (Jackson, 2006).

The emergence of cyberbullying is closely related to the interests of teenagers, the number of those using the Internet and electronic communication devices being ever greater, from younger and younger ages (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bottino et al., 2015). In recent years, these communication tools have become the main way of socialization and interaction among teenagers, allowing them to be constantly connected (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), which is particularly relevant during this specific age period for shaping identity in relation to the social group (Bottino et al., 2015). Online communication has brought many benefits which facilitate psychosocial development, but it has also brought many risks, especially related to the facilitation of cyberbullying as a new type of interpersonal violence (Bottino et al., 2015; Crosby, 2018).

The prevalence of cyberbullying reported by different authors is variable and falls in a wide range between 6.8% and 35.4% for the age category of 10-17 years (Bottino et al., 2015). The meta-analysis carried out by Modecki et al. in 2014, which included 80 studies on different types of bullying among adolescents, reveals a percentage of 15% for victimization by cyberbullying (Modecki et al., 2014). For high school students (grades 9-12), data provided by the Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System indicates a percentage of 15.5% for cyberbullying in 2015 (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Eyuboglu et al. (2021) studied the prevalence of cyberbullying in victims and aggressors separately and showed that the percentage was higher in victims (17% versus 10.5%). Although these studies reported the prevalence of each type of bullying separately, it is recognized that cyberbullying often occurs in combination with traditional bullying (Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019), in the sense that school bullying continues in the online environment after the end of the daily educational program, in weekends and vacation time (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Moreover, there are cases in which

aggression is carried out by the same person in both variants of bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

Furthermore, studies indicate an increasing number of victims in the coming years, in parallel with the increasing number of users of the digital or electronic environment. In the same context, some estimates suggest that 20-40% of adolescents will have at least one cyberbullying experience during their teenage years (Tokunaga, 2010).

### **Classification of cyberbullying actions/behaviours**

Cyberbullying actions/behaviours fall into a very broad field and include:

- sending individual text messages (e-mail, SMS) with a threatening, harassing subject (Brailovskaia, Teismann & Margraf, 2018);
- posting public humiliating, insulting, threatening, or derogatory comments, or intended to make fun of the victim (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Brailovskaia et al., 2018);
- disclosing personal information or posting personal pictures in public space without permission (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bottino et al., 2015);
- manipulating pictures and sharing them with a wide audience through various communication and socialization platforms (Bottino et al., 2015).

Starting from a list of eight specific behaviours identified by Willard (2007), Nocentini et al. (2010) classified the cyberbullying behaviours into four patterns:

- the written-verbal pattern (phone calls and messages or comments on any of the electronic spaces);
- the visual pattern (the publication of compromising photos and videos);
- the pattern of exclusion (from online groups);
- the pattern of impersonation (by using the victim's login data to access their personal online account).

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) classified cyberbullying behaviours into minor (e.g., hassling, ignoring, disrespecting) and major (e.g., spreading rumours and threatening).

Crosby (2018) identified two types of cyberbullying: cyberthreats and cyberstalking. Cyberthreats include messages/posts intended to incite violence (self- or heteroaggression) and can be direct (e.g., when the victim is directly threatened with death) or indirect (e.g., when the victim is induced to think it is useless to keep being alive). Cyberstalking involves messages sent with the aim of intimidating, scaring, or harassing the victim.

### **Risk factors for cyberbullying**

A number of risk factors place adolescents at greater risk of becoming both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying.

The presence of adolescents in the online communication space (e.g., chat room) for several hours a day predisposes to cyberbullying, the risk increasing

proportionally to the number of hours spent online. Added to this are relationship difficulties, hyperactivity, inattention, behavioural disorders, and difficulties in managing the school activities (Bottino et al., 2015).

In terms of age, some studies (Bauman et al., 2013; Eyuboglu et al., 2021) indicate a greater risk with increasing age, students in the last year of high school being the most prone to both victimization and aggression in the online environment. This may be due to the fact that students perceive this period of their life as one of transition, being aware that physical interaction will decrease with entering college or the labour market. Thus, the time spent by students in the last year of school in the online environment is greater, gradually replacing face-to-face interaction (Bauman et al., 2013). The increasing use of telephones and Internet predisposes to a higher risk of being involved in cyberbullying towards the end of the high school (Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

Research showed mixed results on gender as a risk factor for cyberbullying. For example, Bauman et al. (2013) found that boys are more likely to be involved in bullying and cyberbullying behaviours compared to girls. On the other hand, Hinduja and Patchin (2019) found a greater predisposition for cyberbullying in girls compared to boys. One explanation for this result places girls in the category of people who engage in indirect and relational conflicts rather than conflicts involving physical force (Orpinas et al., 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). In the study conducted by Boel-Studt and Renner (2013), a greater predisposition to be victims of cyberbullying was found for girls as compared to boys. The same study showed that girls are more prone to emotional damage in general, and boys have a higher predisposition to be perpetrators compared to girls, but also victim-perpetrators at the same time. The different results provided by various studies can be explained by cultural factors specific to each country, as well as by their level of economic development, with easier or more difficult access to the Internet and electronic communication devices.

Engaging in traditional bullying behaviours increases the risk of cyberbullying for all participants (victims and bullies). This element can be important for facilitating the understanding of this new type of bullying (Bottino et al., 2015).

The risk factors for becoming a victim of cyberbullying include using a web camera and posting personal information in the public online space (Bottino et al., 2015). Added to these, Sourander et al. (2010) highlight the following risk factors: coming from single-parent families, health disorders- both somatic, and psychological and relationship difficulties. The same study showed that both the victims and the perpetrators had feelings of insecurity about school attendance and the impression that teachers did not take enough care of them.

The risk factors identified in aggressors include behavioural disorders, unhealthy behaviours (smoking and excessive drinking), and hyperactivity (Sourander et al., 2010). Eyuboglu et al. (2021) identified additional risk factors, such as history of violence and lack of support from parents.

In comparison to the well-defined space where traditional bullying takes place (e.g., school, neighbourhood), the virtual space is unlimited, which allows the cyberbullying behaviour to be witnessed by a wide audience. Moreover, the virtual space allows an unlimited expression because in this case the social control—which is possible in the physical environment (school, for example)—is missing (Bottino et al., 2015).

### **Self-harm and suicide in the context of cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying may harm several aspects of the lives of those involved, i.e., social interaction, school results, and health status - which may include harmful behaviours, self-mutilation, suicidal attempts, and ideation or even suicide. The consequences for victims are all the more important the longer the period of bullying lasts (Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

There are studies indicating the negative impact of cyberbullying on the victims concerning their school results and their way of interacting in the school environment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

The impact of cyberbullying on mental health involves emotional distress, symptoms of depression, and anxiety (Bottino et al. 2015; Brailovskaia et al., 2018; Hinduja & Patchin 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020; Eyuboglu et al., 2021). Added to these are the strong negative emotions such as anger, fear (Bottino et al., 2015), self-pity (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019), low self-esteem (Eyuboglu et al., 2021), and eating disorders (Hinduja & Patchin 2019). The multicentre study performed by Ortega et al. (2012) on the emotional impact of bullying on adolescents indicates that more than two-thirds (68.5%) of them felt anger, upset, worry, stress, fear, and depressive feelings, compared to less than a quarter of the participants (24.5%) who ignored the bullying behaviours. In other studies, the risk of emotional distress was all the greater the older the aggressor was. It was increased in visual cyberbullying behaviours (for example, displaying a photo in public online space), and if the online action continued in the physical space, i.e., the aggressor showing up at the victim's house (Ybarra et al., 2006; Sourander et al., 2010).

At the somatic level, health can be affected both by the occurrence of chronic diseases (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019) and by self-harming behaviours (Nguyen et al., 2020; Eyuboglu et al., 2021). There is a significant association between cyberbullying and alcohol and drug use, which can also damage health (Bottino et al., 2015). On the one hand, such vicious behaviours are considered by victimized teenagers as a way to cope with the negative emotional impact caused by cyberbullying. On the other hand, these substances can interfere with the control of physical pain caused by self-inflicted injuries. At the same time, psychoactive substances can also have a favourable role in the emergence of suicidal or self-harming ideation, reducing inhibition and aggravating negative pre-existing moods (Bauman et al., 2013; Bottino et al., 2015). Eyuboglu et al. (2021) found that self-harm was more frequent among victims of cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying. Among those who were involved in cyberbullying, the highest

levels of self-harm were reported by those who were both victims and bullies, followed by bullies, this behaviour being the least identified among victims.

There are a number of risk factors that predispose the cyberbullied adolescents to self-harm. Among them are genetic load, environmental factors, internalizing and externalizing difficulties, and unfavourable family environment. In addition, some authors suggest that self-harming behaviour is an indirect way of expressing the need for help by victims, when, for example, the family context does not allow them to verbally express the difficulties they are going through (Eyuboglu et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying, self-harm, and suicide are interconnected and interdependent. Studies indicate that a history of self-harm significantly contributes to suicidal behaviours, regardless of their nature (ideation, attempt, or completed suicide) (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Suicide following cyberbullying is called *cyberbullicide* (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), and some of the first cases were reported by Apollo (2007) and Jones (2008), as cited by Hinduja & Patchin (2010).

Prior to the interest among researchers, cyberbullying, and suicide - as their extreme consequences, attracted the attention of the media, and the publication of cases in the press represented, in fact, a starting point for research and legislative changes in this field (Crosby, 2018).

One of the most publicized cases of suicide among teenagers as a result of cyberbullying victimization occurred in 2003. The victim was Ryan Halligan, a 13-year-old boy, who was bullied for his learning difficulties, to which were added allusions to his sexual orientation, with rumours spreading that the boy was homosexual, although the reality was different. The boy was bullied both offline at school and online when he was at home. Some colleagues approached him just to get personal information, which they could then use to make fun of him in front of the other colleagues. The acts of bullying culminated in the boy's suicide, without him seeking support from teachers or parents (Crosby, 2018).

Another dramatic case occurred in 2006 and had as its victim Megan Meier, a 13-year-old teenager girl, who was facing attention deficit, depression, and weight issues. One of her online boyfriends started sending her hateful and hurtful messages, which he also posted publicly on the online platform. The last message the teenager received before deciding to take her own life was an indirect allusion to suicide: "...the world would be a better place without you" (Crosby, 2018).

Adolescent suicide is a major public health problem, with the number of cases increasing significantly in recent years (Bauman et al., 2013). If in 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that suicide was the third cause of death among adolescents in the USA, in 2015 this cause had reached the second place (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Worldwide, in 2009, suicide was placed second in the list of causes of death in this age category (Patton et al., 2009).

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) reported a two-fold higher risk of suicide attempts among cyberbullying participants, regardless of the type of involvement

(as a victim or as an aggressor). In a subsequent study, the same authors identified an 11-fold higher risk of suicide attempts for adolescents who were victims of both traditional and cyberbullying. A possible explanation for this high risk is the amplification of the impact of bullying behaviours when they extend from the offline environment to the online environment, as the emotional control becomes more difficult (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

Suicidal behaviour varies from suicidal ideation to suicide attempts or even completed suicide (Bottino et al., 2015) and it is found among both victims and perpetrators (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bottino et al., 2015), the level being higher in the case of victimization. Specifically, in the study conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2010), which included 1,963 students in 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades, studying in one of the largest school districts in the USA, victims presented a 1.9 times higher risk, and bullies a 1.5 times higher risk of suicide attempts compared to their peers who were not involved in cyberbullying. Also, related to the types of bullying, the results of the same study indicate a higher risk of suicidal behaviours and thoughts among victims of cyberbullying compared to traditional bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Researchers agree that cyberbullying behaviour alone, as an isolated conduct, cannot be decisive for the ideation, attempt or actual performance of suicide (Bottino et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020). The studies show a close association between cyberbullicide and depressive symptoms, decreased self-worth, hopelessness, and loneliness as a result of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bottino et al., 2015).

At the same time, some authors consider self-harm and suicide as the final result of a combination of factors particularly relevant in adolescence such as: a sensitive and unstable period of life (e.g., personality and gender issues, school situation, acquiring unhealthy habits, long time spent on the Internet, low self-esteem), cultural, social (propitious environment for bullying, in which no one intervenes) and family-related factors (living conditions, parents' divorce, lack of support from parents) (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Bottino et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020). The study of suicide cases among adolescents who were bullied (both in the traditional and cyber form) confirms the presence of emotional and social issues that they faced before the decision to commit suicide, such as attending special education classes in elementary school, difficulties in social relations, unsatisfactory academic results, low self-esteem, and depression that required medication (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Likewise, the influence of cyberbullying behaviours on suicidal ideation and attempts is not equal. That is, some behaviours are less serious and have an insignificant impact (e.g., cyberbullying via email messages), compared to situations where cyberbullying behaviours are serious and combined with traditional bullying behaviours, carried out offline (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

## **Cyberbullying- the need for intervention**

Despite the fact that the incidence of suicidal behaviours following cyberbullying is low, the existence of this risk raises an alarm signal regarding the adolescents' safety and requires the implementation of strategic programs to prevent cyberbullying and the serious consequences arising from it (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). To be effective, these programs must be adapted to each age group (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) and aimed at aspects such as coping strategies, life skills, encouraging the request for support in difficult situations, creating helplines or establishing connections to mental health services. Students should also be taught that when they witness such an attack on their peers or when such experiences are shared with them, they must actively intervene to support their peers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019).

Given the relationship between depression and suicidal ideation, positive mental health strategies are useful for reducing or remitting suicidal ideation in people with marked depressive symptoms (Teisman et al., 2016; Brailovskaia et al., 2018).

However, until the implementation of especially dedicated programs, prevention can initially start from the family and from the school. An effective collaboration is necessary between parents, psychologists, and school counsellors, with continuous—but not excessive—monitoring of adolescents' behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Moreover, the study by Nguyen et al. (2020) indicates a significant association between the level of perceived parental acceptance by adolescents (i.e., understanding the child and encouraging him/her to reach his/her potential) and the reduction of self-harming and suicidal behaviours.

Also, adolescents must be made aware of the risks involved in exposing personal information and photos in the online environment, as well as using the web camera in real time, as there is a risk that such information and images will later be used against them (Bottino et al., 2015).

## **Conclusions**

Cyberbullying is a new type of bullying generated by the access to the new electronic means of communication, having an upward trend favoured by increasingly easier access to such technologies. Given the particular nature of the online environment, cyberbullying becomes easier to carry out and disseminate. The main consequences of cyberbullying are psychological, and the most severe ones reach self-harm and suicide. Given the increasing prevalence of cyberbullying behaviour and its potential severe consequences, early intervention and especially prevention are necessary, starting from the awareness of adolescents about cyberbullying, continuing with the involvement of the family and the school, up to specific methods of intervention to effectively address the consequences of cyberbullying.

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# SEXTING: ON THE BORDER FROM SIMPLE CURIOSITY TO “REVENGE PORN” AND THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL CYBERBULLYING

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## **Introduction**

Bullying is a well-known phenomenon popularized since the 1970s by the Norwegian Dan Olweus (1973-original, 1978-English translation), who attributed to it three indispensable elements in his first studies: a) there must be an imbalance of power between the participants; b) it must occur regularly; and c) it must cause inconvenience to a participant (victim).

The most visible forms of this phenomenon are physical bullying; verbal bullying; relational bullying; and bullying using technology, known by the much more familiar name of cyberbullying. It is important to note that bullying can occur in a variety of contexts, both in childhood and adulthood (Monks et al., 2009), despite the common assumption that it occurs primarily in teenage circles.

If physical, verbal, or relationship bullying has existed since ancient times for easily understood reasons, then cyberbullying has developed primarily in the last two decades along with technological advances. Cyberbullying can be done in a variety of dangerous ways. The prevalence of this phenomenon is constantly increasing, as technical devices connected to the Internet can be found in almost every household (and can be used by everyone).

## **Cyberbullying & Sexual Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is often defined as an act that involves intentional and repeated aggression by one person against another through the use of technological devices—for example, tablets, phones, computers etc. (Calvete et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008). This act encompasses a wide range of behaviours that a person may engage in online, from sending personal messages to posting abusive or insulting comments or sharing another person’s sexually explicit material online (Calvete et al., 2010; Kokkinos et al., 2014; Pelfrey & Weber, 2013).

This latter form of cyberbullying is referred to as “sexual cyberbullying” in the scientific literature. This concept is often used to refer to any type of sexual harassment occurring through the use of technology or electronic means (Ehman & Gross, 2019). As we will see in the following paragraphs, this definition refers not only to photos, images, texts, or videos with explicit sexual content but also to

any kind of sexually suggestive messages or threats. Even before social networks played a central role in our lives, researchers had shown that this phenomenon had reached (or was about to reach) alarming levels in society. In 2007, Ybarra & Mitchell found that 15% of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15 had been victims of unwanted sexual advances online. We can clearly see that these percentages have increased over the years, regardless of whether the victims are minors or adults. The main cause is the widespread popularization of all technological means. To support the above assumption, we can cite numerous studies, including the 2012 study conducted by Powell & Henry (on a sample of adults), in which 37% of women admitted that they had been victims of some form of sexual harassment on the Internet at some point in their lives, showing the prevalence of the “sexual cyberbullying” behaviour pattern.

### **Sexting. A risky curiosity?**

To better understand cyberbullying, we need to map the process by which one person becomes a cyberbully and the other person becomes a victim. Sexting is a possible precursor to cyberbullying. Salter et al. (2013) define it as using a digital device, like a phone, computer, tablet, laptop etc., to send, receive, or forward explicit sexual content (messages, photos, videos etc.).

Cyberbullying is becoming increasingly popular in the 21st century and is by no means an isolated phenomenon, as one might think because it is practically one of the various types of sexual interaction in a digital context that is closely linked to sexual arousal (Döring et al., 2021). Moreover, several studies in the scientific literature note that this phenomenon has become increasingly popular in recent years (Dir et al., 2013; Samimi & Alderson, 2014). This is mainly due to technological advances. Furthermore, it is important to note that sexting is also seen as a social phenomenon and—taking this into consideration—we naturally assume that there are cultural differences that could influence the perception regarding this activity (Agustina, 2012).

However, the reasons why people engage in sexting vary widely, as might be expected. Bianchi et al., 2021 found that sexual goals and an improved perception of body image were the most common motivations for engaging in sexting activities. The same authors found that sexual goals increased with the respondent’s age, while body image enhancement showed a quadratic trend, in the sense that it increased from adolescence to early adulthood and decreased from early adulthood to late adulthood.

In addition, Bianchi et al., 2021 mention that researchers at the APA Congress (2015) suggested viewing sexting in a positive light, as a means by which individuals can explore both their sexual relationships and their own sexual identity (Stasko & Geller, 2015). Such a description does not automatically include sexual cyberbullying, but as we will discuss below, the line between using sexting to provoke one’s own pleasure (or to satisfy one’s sexual curiosity) and sexual cyberbullying is one that can very easily be crossed. Furthermore, in 2019, Anwar

et al. indicated that amongst the most important predictors when it comes to students engaging in sexting activities were being in a relationship, social media, and delayed marriages. The results of the research also highlighted that sexting has some positive outcomes which lead the individuals involved to engage in this activity with increased regularity. These outcomes include expectations for sex in real life after sexting or sexual pleasure (Hudson & Marshall, 2017). Another predictor of engaging in sexting is a low level of self-control. Druin et al., 2017 and Reyns et al., 2014, revealed that these students—mainly those who ignore the consequences—are more likely to engage in sexting compared to those with opposite behaviour (students with a high level of self-control).

The fact that sexting represents a curiosity or a risky activity has been proven in many previous research papers. For example, the research conducted by Thomas in 2018 showed that 40% of the female participants reported that the explicit content they had privately sent reached a third party—obviously, the female participants did not want the private content to be shared with the third party. This percentage is particularly concerning, as it is higher than the percentages reported in previous research papers, such as the ones conducted by Lenhart (2009) and Strassberg et al. (2014).

### **The prevalence of sexting involvement**

Since sexting has developed in parallel with technological progress—coinciding with the arrival of technological devices such as phones, tablets, or computers in almost every household (as mentioned above)—we can confidently say that sexting has been adopted mainly by the new generations. For this reason, scientific research on sexting refers almost exclusively to young adults or teenagers. We can also mention that young adults who are sexually active are more likely to be senders and also receivers of sexual content, either via text messages or not (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013)—the same researchers indicated that unprotected sex or sex with multiple partners is not related to sexting. Korenis & Billick (2014) mentioned that Levin (2011) indicated that young people use their digital devices on average 50 hours per week. Considering that the study was conducted 10 years ago, when social networks were not as widespread as they are today, we can confidently assume that the average time young people spend with their digital devices has increased significantly. This could be one of the main reasons why sexting and cyberbullying are so prevalent among young people.

Temple et al. (2012) analysed a sample composed exclusively of high school students, aged between 14 and 19, and found that no less than 28% of respondents had sent a nude picture of themselves; 57% were asked to send sexting material, and 31% asked someone else to send them sexting material. A study conducted by Gordon-Messer et al. (2013) examining the sexting behaviour of young adults (ages 18-24) found that 30% of study participants had sent a sexually explicit message and 41% had received a sexually explicit message. In 2014, Yeung et al. conducted a study of 1,372 teenagers and young adults (ages 16 to 29), in which no less than

40% of those surveyed answered affirmatively when asked if they had ever received or sent sexting-specific material but it must be emphasized that most of the time it was to an ordinary romantic partner. More recently, Mori et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis found that 38.3% of developing adults engage in sexting, while the average prevalence of sexting among adolescents is 14.8%. There are a number of reasons that may account for these findings. For example, adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood and is characterized by the need to establish a relationship with the world and the people who inhabit it. As a result, adolescents tend to place a higher value on interpersonal relationships. Adolescence is also characterized by, among other things, a high level of sexual curiosity (Korenis & Billick, 2014). It is logical that this particular sexual curiosity in young adults could precede sexting (along with the much longer time they spend online).

Regarding gender differences, we should also point out that women are generally much more reluctant and hesitant to sext than men for fear of being perceived negatively if they engage in this behaviour. Women are also concerned about their own intimate images being shared by their partners on social media, which is not the case for men (Temple et al., 2012). Despite this fact, we are forced to recall the existing discrepancies in the literature regarding gender differences in sexting. Thus, we note that there is research that does not suggest the existence of a gender difference (Dake et al., 2012; Rice et al., 2012) and, equally, we can find research stating that men exhibit sexting behaviours more often in comparison with females (Dir et al., 2013; Jonsson et al., 2014), but also that women either send or receive more sexting (Wysocki & Childers, 2011).

It is also worth noting that females (particularly teenagers) are frequently pressured to engage in sexting even when they do not want to. Various studies have found that adolescent girls feel pressured to engage in sexting, and this pressure can be so strong that it outweighs the potential negative consequences (or labels) associated with sexting (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018; Henderson 2011).

In addition, O'Connor & Drouin (2020) also cite the study of Thomas (2018), in which the latter showed that girls feel pressure in relationships and may send nude images not only to avoid conflicts but also to show their romantic partner an increased level of affection. Within the same research, it is also mentioned that not even one of the women who were involved in the research reported feeling good about their own material sent to other people. Instead, many of them reported a state of confusion or coercion when asked for a nude picture by a man.

### **Sexting amongst teenagers**

First of all, it should be remembered that many teenagers state that involvement in sexting is part of the rising generation's culture and that this type of behaviour is seen as perfectly "normal" among peers (Thomas, 2018). O'Connor & Drouin (2020) point out that sexting is generally seen by teenagers as a way for the sexually inexperienced to initiate intimate contact or even begin a romantic relationship (Lenhart, 2009).

The reasons why teenagers engage in sexting are, in most cases, different from the reasons why adults do it. For example, several studies have identified the need for popularity as a predictor of sexting (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2018; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014). In turn, Baumgartner et al. (2015) discussed the fact that for teenagers, posting photos with a sexual tone can be a way through which they gain popularity among peers.

One piece of research worth mentioning is that conducted by Brinkley and his collaborators in 2017. It showed that 10th-grade teenagers who engaged in sexting—just text messages, no pictures—were more likely to report sexual behaviours seen as risky, such as having sex with multiple partners or using drugs during sex in the near future (more specifically, 2 years away).

However, one of the most important insights into adolescent sexting was provided by Del Rey et al. (2019). In this study, it was shown that sexting can lead to experiencing an active emotional impact, but this type of response can represent a stimulus that involves risks for adolescents. The authors highlighted the fact that this stimulus (active emotional response) can make adolescents not fully analyse the possible primary and secondary effects of sexting, along with the associated risks. In this sense, it is concluded that if adolescents have positive experiences from an emotional point of view when they engage in sexting, they may end up not being aware of the risks of this practice. It is important to note that Del Rey et al. (2019) found no gender differences in emotional impact, with the results being similar for both boys and girls.

From another perspective, O’Connor & Drouin (2020) recall that various researchers have identified the fact that the high risk of sexual cyberbullying and cyberbullying is associated with adolescent sexting, especially in the situation where materials with explicit sexual content are shared also with third parties (Ploharz, 2017; Webb, 2018).

### **Sexting. A deviant behaviour?**

On the other hand, as long as sexting is accepted by both individuals involved, it is far from being considered deviant behaviour (Drouin et al., 2017). However, when engaging in sexting is non-consensual, it is considered a clear form of deviant sexual behaviour (Scholes-Balog et al. 2016) and is always criminalized by the laws in force, regardless of the age of the protagonists, as O’Connor and Drouin (2020). On the contrary, it is speculated that it may even be beneficial for relationships (Parker et al., 2013; Wiederhold, 2015)—but, obviously, for this to be beneficial, sexting must be consensual, with the involvement of the protagonists accepted by all parties. However, we note that the benefits of sexting have only recently been highlighted and mentioned by researchers. Historically, the relationship between sexting and psychological well-being has not been thoroughly researched (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). And just one year later, the meta-analysis conducted by Klettke et al. (2014) found that research on sexting and psychological well-being is extremely limited. The fact that the psychological

benefits of sexting have not been emphasized until recently could be for several reasons.

First, when the above study was conducted (at the beginning of the current decade), far fewer people were involved in such activities (with young people being the most likely to sext) than today.

Secondly, as the number of people sexting increases, the social stigma around sexting will disappear, and the phenomenon will fall out of the realm of “taboo topics”, especially in more conservative countries, such as Romania. However, one thing is for sure - this topic is still in its “infancy” and much more research is needed on the benefits that sexting can have on our psychological well-being.

Closing the bracket intended for potential benefits, we must return to the basic question—is sexting deviant behaviour or not? We complete all previous statements with the mention that when an adult and a minor are involved in this behaviour, there is no doubt that sexting is deviant behaviour and constitutes the necessary foundation for the accusation of child pornography (Renfrow & Rollo, 2013).

### **The role of sexting in “Revenge Porn”**

But of course, we need to be aware of the fact that there is a flip side. Sometimes sexting can be beneficial, but at other times, the line between this activity and sexual cyberbullying is extremely thin. As mentioned earlier, we must acknowledge that sexting can be a form of sexual cyberbullying (Ehman et al., 2018). Moreover, several studies speak of the difference between “experimental sexting”—which is used as a means of exploring sexuality (and could be interpreted as the kind of sexting that benefits our psychological well-being) and “aggravated sexting”—which is used with harmful intentions, is abusive and has serious consequences (Wolak et al., 2012). The latter, which is transformed into cyberbullying, can involve harassment of partners (Calvert 2013; Drouin & Tobin; 2014; Morelli et al., 2016), but can also manifest between people who are not necessarily in a relationship (Medrano et al., 2018; Vanden Abeele et al., 2014), as shown in the research by Bianchi et al. (2021).

### **The reasons behind “Revenge Porn”**

Considering that revenge porn can be perceived as an extreme act, it is only natural to wonder why a person would post and share compromising photos (or other sexually explicit material) of ex-partners online. Certainly, there are plenty of reasons why a person might resort to such an act, and no one can name them all, as they all stem from different emotional difficulties. But we must mention one important classification, described by Jaiswal in 2021. The author speaks of three main reasons why a person might resort to such actions:

1. Revenge—usually with the aim of defaming the person depicted in the explicit materials, often out of the desire that the one who spreads the materials will end any kind of relationship with the victim.
2. Fame—in this case, the perpetrator wants to be proud of owning the relevant materials, regardless of whether they were produced with or without consent; the aggressor can become much more popular by spreading the materials, both in the online environment where they spread them and in circles of real people who glorify such problematic behaviours (this non-consensual forwarding of explicit material may be due to the fact that sexting is seen by some men as a way to increase their social status, as O’Connor and Drouin note in 2020).
3. Extortion—in extortion, the perpetrator may use the explicit sexual materials in their possession to obtain material (e.g., money) or sexual benefits from the victim (e.g., by asking the victim to have sexual relations and promising not to disclose these materials).

In addition to the reasons outlined by Jaiswal (2021), we note that the pattern of extortion may include copying materials already in the attacker’s possession. Victims are notified by him that their own photos, voicemails (audio), or videos (or other sexually explicit material) will be shared unless they send additional sexually explicit content (Chawky & Shazly, 2013).

### **The potential legal consequences of sexting**

It is also essential to take into account that sexting can easily become a criminal offense, especially if it involves photos, voice messages (audio), or videos, and not only text messages. As for the existing legislation in Romania, in November 2021, the decision of the Supreme Court of Cassation and Justice (No. 51/2021) was published in the Official Gazette. According to this decision, a person who disseminates pornographic material without the consent of the person depicted in it (whether or not the material was created with his or her consent) may be punished under criminal law as a violation of private life. If the material obtained through sexting is redistributed without consent, this can be considered a form of “porn revenge.” This term per se stands for the dissemination of sexual images or videos without the consent of the individuals involved (Citron & Franks, 2014). The Romanian law mentioned earlier (noting that it could be greatly improved in the future) is a particularly important step in terms of the legal fight against sexual cyberbullying. This law has been practically aligned with the laws on “revenge porn” that already exist in countries such as Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK, Canada, and in 48 of the 50 US states etc.

One of the most famous “revenge porn” cases at the international level is that of the MyEx.com website, which was shut down by the FTC (Federal Trade Commission-USA) on January 9, 2018. This website offered people the opportunity to upload free photos or videos of their ex-partners (or other acquaintances) in intimate situations (often along with their real names). The site made its profit by

charging fees to people who demanded that their own intimate material posted without their consent be removed. In this sense, the site was clearly perceived as a form of extortion.

Fearing action from sites like MyEx.com, some couples have begun to include clauses regarding “revenge porn” in their prenuptial agreements for their own protection (Hymes, 2014).

To prevent such cases, sex education in schools focusing on sexting behaviour is imperative. Various laws around the world, especially in the USA, criminalize also sexting involving two consenting teenagers. It is known that adolescents often do not have the ability to anticipate the consequences of their behaviour (Perkins et al., 2014), and sex education about sexting can support this fact. Through it, students can succeed in understanding that engaging in sexting can have legal consequences (Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018; O’Connor et al. 2017).

### **The psychological consequences of sexual cyberbullying**

It follows that victims of such behaviour often report troubling consequences. Reed et al. (2016) speak of the fact that victims of such harassing behaviour perpetrated by their intimate partners may furthermore be victims of psychological and sexual abuse. The same study found evidence that victims of cyberbullying were more likely to suffer from loneliness and depressive symptoms. In addition, Mitchell et al. (2011), using a sample of 2051 adolescents aged 10 to 17, showed that victims of online sexual harassment were more likely to experience trauma or delinquency. Short et al. (2017), in turn, mention that victims of revenge porn (a sample of 64 individuals aged 18 to 63) experienced changes in areas such as their own relationships (including feelings of isolation from family and friends) and difficulties at work. In addition, the same authors believed that several participants in their study experienced anxiety and worry.

Equally, regarding adolescents, Dake et al. (2012) showed that sexting among adolescents contributes to an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, even suicide, when the behaviour of bullying revolves around sexually explicit content. One of the cases that reveal how serious the consequences of sexting can be among teenagers was mentioned in the article written by O’Connor and Drouin (2020). The authors described the case of a 13-year-old Florida student named Hope Witsell. When she was a student in the 7th grade, she sent a topless photo to a boy she was attracted to. Another student found the topless photo of Hope Witsell on the boy’s phone and shared it with other students (Inbar, 2009). Insulted and wronged in the worst possible way, a few months after this incident, Hope Witsell (who had also been suspended from school) decided to end her days by hanging herself in her own bedroom.

In addition to our own perceptions of what is happening, it is important to note the fact that society itself can also blame the victims of revenge porn. McKinlay & Lavis (2020) examined how victims are perceived and concluded that they are viewed as more promiscuous and blamed more when the content shared

is that which shows them naked, underscoring the importance of developing policies that address the potential stigmatization of revenge victims.

### **Sexting after the COVID-19 pandemic**

Before jumping to conclusions, we have no alternative but to state the existing situation of sexting globally. As we could note before, it has been on a continuous crescendo, popularizing itself in parallel with the development of technologies as well as with the distribution of digital devices all over the world. But equally, we must be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic we are in the middle of has had and continues to have a particularly important impact, including as regards sexting behaviour.

In a time in which social isolation was encouraged and even imposed, sexting, as well as other sexual behaviours that could be carried out online, were encouraged, being abstracted from their risks regarding psychological well-being (Alpalhão & Filipe, 2020). Bianchi et al. (2021) recall that couples who did not live together were suddenly forced to switch to a long-distance relationship (Wijayanti, 2021), with sexting becoming a particularly important alternative both for maintaining intimacy and for fulfilling the sexual desires that either partner has, in this context.

As expected, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as recalled by Bianchi et al. (2021), online sexual activity (including sexting) increased (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2020; Gabster et al., 2022). Furthermore, the research conducted by Bianchi et al. (2021) provided evidence that adults used sexting to cope with stress during the pandemic, either through adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies.

Given that various forms of COVID-19 are continuously emerging and that in some countries there are still restrictions on meetings between people, we can start from the premise that the degree of involvement in sexting is, in turn, increasing. It remains to be seen how the pandemic has left its mark on this sexual behaviour as well, but only further post-pandemic research will be able to conclude that. However, it is legitimate to consider that the level of involvement in sexting is currently at an all-time high.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, Ehman et al. (2018) note that for every technological change that humans naturally produce as a result of progress, there is a legitimate concern about how these advances might change the way we interact. In other words, we can see that technological advances have tremendous benefits for humanity, but they also give malicious people more tools with which to do harm. One of the ways they can harm others is through sexual cyberbullying.

As far as teenagers are concerned, there is research that talks about the link between sexting behaviour and the likelihood of sexual intercourse, substance

abuse of any type, but also other mental and emotional difficulties (Ševčíková 2016; Temple & Choi 2014).

It is also worrying that adolescents feel reluctant to approach adults for support and guidance when faced with difficulties related to cybersexual bullying or sexting, due to fear of retaliation or embarrassment (Thomas, 2018; Tsai, 2017). This perception needs to change, and it is particularly important that further information programs (be they school-based programs or general information programs aimed at both adults and adolescents) are designed and implemented by the relevant authorities. In this way, teenagers alike could turn to their parents or adults for help when they are in trouble, and the latter would know the most effective ways to intervene and provide support.

In conclusion, the psychological consequences for victims are obvious, and there is no doubt that we need to develop programs to help them, tailored to the individual needs of each person who has been victimized. As McKinlay & Lavis (2020) point out, these programs must also focus on stigmatizing victims and raising awareness of the risks faced by people who engage in sexting.

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# **PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING**



# THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELLORS IN CYBERBULLYING PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

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## **Introduction**

With the advent of computers and other smart devices, bullying entered the electronic age, and its influence seems to be more pervasive than before. Cyberbullying has a high prevalence in Romania, and the legal policies trying to counter it are still in their infancy. Thus, school becomes an important environment where youth can develop all the necessary skills to avoid cyberbullying or, in the worst-case scenario, to cope with it. Among all the school staff, school counsellors can have a higher responsibility in helping children deal with cyberbullying. In this chapter, we will present how counsellors can do that, but also the hindrances that must be overcome. We will talk about general and specific prevention and intervention programs used internationally and in Romania, and we will also present a short guideline for school counsellors on how to work with their colleagues, their students, and their parents to fight against cyberbullying.

The understanding of cyberbullying, from the perspective of the victim as well as from that of the perpetrator, has dramatically increased in recent years. More and more studies are developed, and more interventions are tested with the aim of decreasing the levels of cybernetic victimization. However, the prevalence rates of cyberbullying remain high, especially in a country such as Romania, where the legislation lacks sufficient depth to identify and punish such behaviours correctly. Previous studies have shown that Romanian schools have a rate of cyber victimization as high as 37.3 % and that, in general, cyberbullying is twice as present in our country compared to most European countries (Athanasίου et al., 2018; Lobe et al., 2011). Thus, schools must treat cyberbullying with the utmost attention and establish the right ways to teach about victimization and develop the necessary abilities so that children would not be involved in cyberbullying actions.

Among the school staff, the counsellor is tasked with creating and delivering the necessary interventions for supporting the students' mental health and well-being. Through individual and group counselling, the counsellor is involved in preventing and reducing issues that cause behavioural disorders, risky behaviour, or mental discomfort in the students. Of course, one such issue is cyberbullying. However, the counsellor also works with the teachers and parents and can offer

assistance and training. Given that cyberbullying is a problem that can affect the students at home and school, the counsellors must use all their attributions, and all their work means to create a secure environment for education and well-being.

### **What causes cyberbullying and how does it affect students' behaviours, well-being, and performance?**

Cyberbullying is similar, in some respects, to bullying, as there is an imbalance of power and the harmful behaviour is intentional and repeated (König, Gollwitzer, & Steffgen, 2010). What differentiates cyberbullying from classical bullying is the anonymity aspect of cyberbullying (Nocentini, Calmaestra, Schultze-Krumbholz, & Scheithauer, 2010). Anonymity can be part of the imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim, and, in addition, it can make the intervention process more difficult. If the effects of cyberbullying are easier to predict, the causes of it are not always apparent.

In adolescents and young adults, some causes of cyberbullying are romantic break-ups, envy, intolerance, and ganging up (making a joint assault on a victim) (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). These causes fit the understanding of bullying as a proactive or reactive process. Thus, bullying and cyberbullying, by extension, can be proactive, the harmful behaviours being motivated by the wish to achieve something (status, dominance) or an emotional reaction to frustration and anger (Pellegrini, 2002). Additionally, the development of technology and the internet are not direct causes of cyberbullying but represent important risk factors. The development of smartphones and tablets and the readily available internet made it possible for even small children to access them and potentially be at risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying or perpetrators (Bauman, 2014). The rise of technology imposes another danger, one that is also connected to the parents. In children, the healthy habits of using them are not yet developed, and it is not always understood when or how it is appropriate to use smartphones or tablets (Bauman, 2014). Some parents introduce their children to smartphones from a very young age, sometimes as a means of comforting the distressed child, and the use continues as the children grow, but it is not doubled by education regarding the threats of technology and the internet, such as cyberbullying. Moreover, both the parents and the school can perpetuate cyberbullying because they reinforce social norms that are positive towards such aggression (Lazuras et al., 2013).

The effects of cyberbullying are multiple and affect various life domains. It can impact an individual's behaviours, overall well-being, and performance. Recent studies have found significant links between cyberbullying and substance abuse. For example, cyberbullies and those who are both victims and aggressors have a three-times higher risk than those not involved in cyberbullying of consuming risky substances (such as alcohol, tobacco, cocaine, cannabis, or ecstasy). Also, victims show a higher risk of substance use than those non-involved (Khiné et al., 2020; Pichel et al., 2022).

Just like traditional bullying, cyberbullying is related to a series of psychological maladjustments. For example, Nordahl and her colleagues (2013) found that cyber victimization is associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviours in the school-age population. Given that the victim and the aggressor can become connected each time they are on the Internet, victimized students might develop feelings of helplessness and anxiety, believing there is no escape from their aggressors. Also, the victims tend to be humiliated in front of their online friends, and this issue might determine them to lessen their social bonds. By doing so, they also lose social support and can develop depressive thoughts (Nordahl et al., 2013). Not surprisingly, students who are bullied at school report more suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (Hinduja & Patchi, 2019). Also, the risk of experiencing self-harm is more than twice higher for those who were cyber victimized compared to a non-victimized population. Although not as high, a greater risk for suicide ideation and behaviours was also found in cyberbullying perpetrators (John et al., 2018). Additionally, individuals that experience cyberbullying are at an increased risk of cutting ties with their friends, skipping classes, and losing confidence (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). Finally, cyberbullying victims' externalizing behaviours are more robust (Nordahl et al., 2013).

In terms of school results, previous studies found that being involved in cyberbullying is related to a decrease in academic performance. However, the most substantial effects were found for those students who were, at the same time, both victims and aggressors (Aparisi et al., 2021; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). School performance can also suffer if the student feels disassociated from the school (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008). For them, there are higher chances of skipping classes or not following the requirements, which, in turn, will impact their performance.

Now that we know the responsibilities of a school counsellor and the potential dangers a student experience by being involved in the cyberbullying process, it is easy to understand why counsellors should get involved and work with students who are victims, aggressors, or both. However, finding the right way to do so is not always easy. In the following sections, we will discuss some myths about the school's relationship with cyberbullying, the difficulties a counsellor can encounter, how the prevention and intervention programs were developed in other countries, and how they look in Romania.

### **Three myths about the school's role in anti-cyberbullying action**

In her book, Englander (2020) discussed a series of 25 myths about bullying and cyberbullying. Although not all of them are related to the school setting, we believe that each one is particularly interesting and could guide a school counsellor's work with children participating in the cyber victimization process. Still, for brevity, we will concentrate on the three myths closest to the school domain.

1. *Schools do not do anything about cyberbullying.* Englander (2020) argues that, for a long time, bullying was not recognized by schools. In order to keep an illusion of safety in front of the parents, few school officials would have agreed to classify bullying as a reality in the institutions. Similar thoughts should be related to cyberbullying as well. Many teachers would disagree that such problems exist in their classrooms. This situation derives not only from a lack of understanding but also from underestimating the consequences of cyberbullying. Moreover, the author continues and says that most adults consider victimization as a gateway toward adulthood. Mean acts are ordinary and not very visible to them, and such “minor” transgressions can be overlooked. Thus, teaching teachers how to recognize bullying and cyberbullying, even in their more lightweight forms, becomes crucial. The school counsellor should work with the children, teachers, and parents to create an environment where everybody reacts and responds in the same way to cyberbullying and where everybody involved is aware of the consequences and dangers of such behaviours.
2. *Schools cannot take any action against cyberbullying.* With the advent of smartphones, children are most of the time connected to the Internet, meaning they can be victimized anywhere and anytime. Also, it is difficult for the school to cut children’s access to smartphones and tablets completely. Consequently, many consider that schools do not have the means to fight against cyberbullying. This is false. While many cyberbullying acts happen outside of the school environment, Englander (2020) considers that there is also an important spill-over effect. When a child is cyberbullied outside of school, this problem usually occurs inside the school too. Thus, the counsellor and the teachers have the opportunity to intervene. Englander (2020) proposes using a “safe person”, an adult whose role is to listen to the child and help him/her whenever necessary. The school counsellor could fulfil this task, although another teacher, who is closer to the child, could also play the part. Also, various prevention methods could be implemented. These can tackle cyber victimization inside and outside the school, involve the parents, and reinforce the idea that children should talk about their problems with the school personnel.
3. *Schools could absolutely stop cyberbullying if they wanted to.* Schools can have the means to punish cyberbullying. The aggressors can have their discipline grades decreased or can be expelled. However, such acts can be disproportionate and have many negative long-term consequences. Englander (2020) argues that in the United States, these disciplinary measures are rather targeting students of different minorities (racial or sexual) compared to white students. In Romania, although there are no studies to show such implications, similar problems can potentially be found. Also, some punishments can be more severe than the act

necessitates. Thus, “zero-tolerance” policies can do more harm than good (Englander, 2020). A balance between the bullying act and the proper punishment should be found. Also, parents should be involved in this situation. There is a stringent need for responsibility when dealing with such problems, and the child, the school, and the parents all have their part in this process.

### **Why is it difficult to assess cyberbullying and fight against it? Notes from real teachers**

International studies show that 74 % to 93 % of teenagers are connected to the Internet and use social media (Duggan et al., 2015; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Also, social media communication is an important factor in building generational identity among the youth (Napoli, 2014). Thus, separating school students from their smartphones is a challenging task. Unfortunately, there are no Romanian studies that tried to view how the teachers look at this task. In their book, Weber and Pelfrey Jr. (2014) present the results of focus-group discussions about cyberbullying conducted with both students and school staff. For this chapter, the teachers’ opinions are more valuable. Many of them consider that it is challenging to ban the use of phones in schools. Not only will the children always find ways to take their phones in the classrooms and access the Internet, but sometimes, the parents are directly responsible for this. The authors reveal a case when, despite knowing that the use of the phone would bring a 25-dollar fine, a parent still decided to text their child a joke during biology class. Thus, separating children from their phones is hard, but just as hard might be to separate the children from their parents.

Another problem revealed by Weber and Pelfrey Jr. (2014) is related to the privacy of the students. They state that the students are generally willing to report cases of cyberbullying, but sometimes when they show the proof, they are afraid that the teacher might discover some private conversation on their phones. However, other studies show that students are afraid to report cyber victimization to their teachers or parents (Snakenborg et al., 2011). Fear of being punished can cause this. We can assume that some students might be less willing to report cyberbullying out of fear of what the teacher could discover something about their private lives. They can be afraid or ashamed. Students can also believe that the counsellors are too slow to respond to their problems and, consequently, do not even try to reach them (Simao et al., 2017). A critical drawback in Weber and Pelfrey Jr.’s study (2014) is that staff opinion can be biased. As previously mentioned, teachers can underestimate the dangers and occurrences of cyberbullying. They can also believe that the students have enough faith in them to entrust them with their problems, an opinion that can be wrong given that many students might not report such acts. As such, it becomes even more important for someone from the school (such as the counsellor) to act as the “safe person” for the students, who offers safety and can protect their secrets and personal issues. By

showing the students they can be trusted, many more victims can be convinced that talking to counsellors is necessary and the right way to start working on their issues.

Another problem teachers and counsellors face is a lack of proper training in dealing with cyberbullying. One study found that the counsellors were frustrated given they must intervene in cyberbullying issues using the same tactics they use when dealing with bullying. They reported needing more accurate policies and proper training to tackle this specific issue to help the students and the parents (Chan et al., 2020).

### **How to evaluate cyberbullying and work with the victims, the aggressors, and the witnesses**

Assessing cyberbullying is difficult, as we can easily see, but there are some means that can help the school counsellor in this task. The easiest way to assess cyberbullying, especially for younger children, is to ask them about it, while older children and adolescents can write about their experiences. However, how the questions are constructed matters very much for an accurate assessment (Campbell & Bauman, 2018). General questions that refer to the entire phenomenon of cyberbullying tend to bring less accurate results than those questions that ask about specific behaviours (Huang & Cornell, 2015). The differences in answers are not given by the intention to hide or disclose cyberbullying but by the mere lack of knowledge of what cyberbullying truly is. Therefore, school counsellors should ask about specific behaviours when assessing cyberbullying, as well as define and inform the children about all the particularities of the phenomenon. Moreover, the counsellor can use scaling to evaluate the level of severity as it is perceived by the student (Bauman, 2014). This method does not imply using a standardized scale. Instead, the counsellor can ask the student to assess, on a simple scale from 1 to 10, how bad his/her problem is. Also, the counsellor can ask how the student manages to keep the problems at such a level (the students will rarely answer with 1), thus encouraging him/her to talk about the problem and about the solutions they already tried. One final mention should be made regarding the possible psychological disorders the students can have. Pre-existing conditions can act as determinants of cyber aggression or cyber victimization. When such concerns arise, the counsellor should refer those students for a formal diagnosis and should recommend psychotherapy or psychiatric help. At the same time, the counselling sessions should continue (Bauman, 2014).

Framing is also important. To break the students' defences, the counsellor can frame cyber aggression as having trouble in school, and cyber victimization as being unhappy in school (Bauman, 2014). Thus, the students will be less inclined to justify their behaviours.

Generally speaking, the aims of the interventions should be to inspire altruism, hope, cohesiveness, and identification (Bauman, 2014). However, these aims are achieved differently based on the status of the student, as a victim or as

an aggressor. When working with the victim, the counsellor should not trivialize the problem and take the students' concerns seriously. The counsellors should reassure the victims that they have no fault in the process and should try to make them report the case (to their parents or to the teachers). Still, it is important to find out what the students want. Some of them just want information, while others might want solutions. One important step in helping the victims is to reinforce their social networks. Positive peer relationships are needed to reduce isolation and increase social support (Campbell, 2007). Group counselling can also be a solution, but the students have to share their stories and information. If the students want to report the incidents, the counsellor should also involve the parents and the other teachers in protecting the victim. However, parents should be taught that communication and support work better than extreme monitoring.

When working with cyberbullies, developing empathy is an important task. This can be done by using movies, news, or stories about the effects of cyberbullying (Bauman, 2014). However, the counsellor should not forget that the bully usually does not want to be present at the counselling sessions. Thus, fair treatment and a general non-accusing discourse are recommended. The parents and families of the bullies should also be involved in the counselling. However, parents should be made aware that exaggerated severity is not useful. Also, complete surveillance of all technological means is both nearly impossible and not advised. The counsellor and the parents should decide together which the most appropriate monitoring strategies are. Also, the bully can be encouraged to make amends with the victim (Bauman, 2014).

Special attention should also be given to witnesses. They usually act in three different roles: outsiders, assistants of the aggressors, or defendants of the victims. Although the role of a defendant is desirable, most young people reported having dilemmas when deciding whether to intervene or not (Pepler et al., 2021). They can be afraid of becoming a target, losing their social status, or making things worse. Students should be taught to document or report the cyberbullying, privately offer help to the victim, mediate the conflict between the parties, or confront the aggressor. In addition, students should be encouraged to make their own decisions regarding the best strategy they could use when witnessing cyberbullying.

### **School-level prevention and intervention programs targeting cyberbullying**

In recent years, the necessity for evidence-based interventions targeting cyberbullying has risen. Many practitioners responded to these needs by designing a series of programs used to prevent cyber victimization or to intervene and mitigate the process. A systematic review by Tanrikulu (2018) examined the prevention and intervention programs in schools and observed that the former was most targeted, with only two studies presenting an intervention. However, most of the results obtained by the various authors were encouraging, showing that the programs were effective. Still, another problem was observed by the author. Few

studies included in the review used technological means of prevention and intervention. This shows that the professionals involved in these programs still tend to use information and techniques that worked when targeting traditional bullying and apply them to the cybernetic environment.

On a more general level, a strong need for the involvement of school counsellors in the prevention of cyberbullying is recognized by both students and most previous studies. One qualitative study showed that the students want the counsellors to be reasonable when dealing with cyberbullying. While the children want the school staff to find out who the aggressor is, warn them of the potential dangers, and offer them solutions when dealing with the problems, they need this to happen in a secure environment (Burnham et al., 2011). Presenting the students with enough information; supervising them on the school grounds; empowering the victims of cyberbullying; and setting clear rules regarding unacceptable behaviours are some general strategies that can be employed by school counsellors (Elbedour et al., 2020). Also, the counsellor can talk to the authorities, other teachers, and parents and make all these parts feel responsible for the well-being of the children (Chibbaro, 20007). However, given that the previous generation did not deal with such problems, admitting that not all the answers are immediately available is a healthy way to remain in touch with the children's issues and the new ways to deal with them. As previously mentioned, many teachers and parents are reluctant to recognize cyberbullying as a severe issue. School counsellors might also be in this group. Thus, participation in various training sessions is necessary to acquire new skills. Similarly, keeping an open mind might be of particular use (Florang, 2020).

As such, some programs were developed to tackle the counsellors' training. Altundag and Ayas (2020) describe a four-session psychoeducational program for school counsellors. In the first session, they are presented with theoretical information about cyberbullying, how they can recognise it, and how they can help others to cope with it. Sessions two and three deal more with the technological aspects of cyberbullying, with the social networks where it can appear, and the software that the parents can use to monitor the children's online activity. Finally, during the last session, the counsellors are offered various tools that can be used when discussing cyberbullying with parents, teachers, and students. Thus, the counsellor can keep all the parties involved well-informed and ready to act.

Other programs were developed to help the children develop social-emotional learning strategies, self-efficacy, mindfulness, and various coping strategies (Gabrielli et al., 2021). Finally, counsellors can also work in small groups to promote empathy, resilience, and assertiveness in their students (Paolini, 2018).

In Romania, The Internet Hour (*rom. Ora de net*) is a national program implemented with the help of the County's Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance. It aims to inform and promote some services that help children safely navigate the Internet. Also, it creates awareness about cyberbullying and other

related issues, such as Internet abuse, sexting, and using other forms of illegal online content (Cenușă, 2016).

While some prevention and intervention programs are rather complex and necessitate funding, others are simple and easy to implement. School counsellors can still develop valuable ways to help students deal with cyber victimization even when lacking significant material acquisitions. One example is a simple four-step process called Stop, Save, Block, and Tell (Snakenborg et al., 2011). Students should be taught to recognize aggressive online behaviour and, consequently, not to respond to it anymore (STOP). As a second step, students must try to SAVE a copy of the message that came as an email, a picture, a comment, a meme, a video, or any other format. By doing so, they can prove the identity of the aggressor, something that can lead to legal prosecution in the future. In the third step, the student can BLOCK the aggressor. All social networking sites have an option to block, so this can be easy. However, when the cyber aggressor uses more than one platform to bully, blocking can be more difficult but not impossible. Finally, the student must talk to an adult and tell them about the victimization (TELL). Unfortunately, sometimes this can be rather difficult to do. However, as long as the adult is supportive, the child should find a secure enough environment to discuss the issue.

### **A short guide of the steps a counsellor can take to prevent cyberbullying (based on Bhat, 2008)**

1. A school counsellor can act as a leader of the community and work with those involved in the cyberbullying process and those that can be affected by it. This means that the counsellor has the responsibility to guide students towards the best ways to protect themselves when using the Internet; to teach parents and help them connect with their children, regardless of whether they are victims or aggressors; and to instruct their colleagues on how to spot cyberbullying and how to deal with it.
2. A counsellor can be involved in the community and work with the authorities and other professionals to create a more nuanced legal environment for addressing cyberbullying. In Romania, each County's Centre for Educational Resources and Assistance is involved in various prevention programs through their school counsellors. However, these can receive more support from state institutions. Also, without a clear legal delimitation of cyberbullying, the programs cannot fully achieve their aims.

In their specific work with the students, a counsellor must:

1. Educate students on how to recognize and report cyberbullying. This can be done through various organized prevention programs but can also be achieved personally through individual or group counselling sessions. Students must learn to trust the counsellor and other adults whose role is

to help the students in times of need. Also, counsellors should work with all those involved, victims, aggressors, and bystanders, in order to reduce victimization and retaliation. The relationship between the children and the “safe person” from the school seems particularly important. One study has shown that the associations between cyber victimization and suicide ideation, planning, and attempts are significantly buffered if the victim has a mentoring relationship with an adult from the school (this can be the counsellor or any other teacher) (Aguayo et al., 2022).

2. Present the consequences of being an aggressor involved in cyberbullying. One of the defining characteristics of cyberbullying is anonymity. However, students must know that on the Internet few acts are truly anonymous. They must know that the actions can have educational or even legal repercussions. Although these should not be presented (or applied) exaggeratedly, students should be aware of the effects cyberbullying can have on them or others.
3. Target aggressive behaviours and implement various techniques to reduce them. Also, the counsellor should cultivate empathy, pro-social behaviours, and social support in their students. They can also try to develop the students’ social skills, conflict-solving abilities, and emotional regulation strategies (Ang & Goh, 2010; Arato et al., 2020; den Hamer & Konijn, 2016; Hellfeldt et al., 2020. Tangen & Campbell, 2010). Given that all of these traits are associated with lower levels of cyberbullying, working on them can be a valuable prevention tactic.

In their specific work with the parents, a school counsellor must:

1. Teach the parents how to properly monitor the children’s online activity. Since some parents can be highly intrusive in their children’s private conversations, counsellors must help them find the balance between monitoring and overprotection. Parents should be made aware of the software developed to monitor children’s online activity and use it in moderation. Also, with the help of counsellors, parents must teach their children how to communicate on the Internet, what information to give and what to keep private, and how to behave in conversation with other children.
2. Help parents to have open and sincere discussions with their children about the dangers they can find on the Internet. Also, many students are afraid to tell their parents about their cyber victimization, fearing that they will be punished. The caregivers should be made aware that the situation would not be solved by imposing more restrictions on the child, whose social life might already be in danger.

In their specific work with other teachers, a school counsellor must:

1. Teach colleagues how to recognize cyberbullying and how to report it. Teachers should know that punitive strategies are not the best when

dealing with aggressors. Moreover, some of these can be illegal. They also must know that traditional bullying and cyberbullying are different.

2. Show the other school staff how to talk with the parents and the children alike. In many cases, the parents want to talk more with the teachers, and less with the counsellor. The teacher must be able to inform the parents about the issue and propose some solutions to the problems. The teachers should always discuss these solutions with the counsellor, but sometimes they must be those who inform the parents.

## Conclusions

School counsellors have the responsibility to prevent and reduce the issues that cause behavioural disorders, risky behaviour, or mental discomfort in students. Among these, cyberbullying has risen in recent years. Moreover, because many cyberbullying acts take place in schools, the task of the counsellor becomes even more important. However, evaluating and intervening in such situations is not easy. In Romania, the legislation is not clear. Moreover, parents and other teachers also have a crucial role in cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Thus, the counsellor should concentrate on the students, as well as on their parents and teachers.

The school counsellor should also differentiate between the aggressors, victims and witnesses and use different methods of work for each role a student might have. In this chapter, we offered some recommendations regarding the counselling of each of the three categories, but evidence-based intervention and prevention methods are still scarce. Thus, it is unclear which strategies work better in schools. However, this should not detract the counsellors from their work, which can be improved by using the short guidelines from the end of the chapter.

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# CYBERBULLYING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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**Adina KARNER-HUȚULEAC**

## **Introduction**

Cyberbullying is defined as “an intentional and repeated aggressive act in an electronic context (e.g., email, blogs, chatrooms, social media, text messages, instant messages, online games, or websites) against a person who cannot easily defend oneself” (Moreno, 2014).

The main motives for electronic aggression include revenge, jealousy, fun, or entertainment (Grech, & Lauri, 2022), and a low score on self-control is one of characteristics of cyberaggressors (Erreygers et al., 2016; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2016). The fact that they benefit to a certain extent from anonymity, do not come into direct contact with the victim, and do not know what the victim feels (low empathy) determines a low level of awareness of the gravity of the emotional consequences (Bauman, 2007; Joinson, 2007; Bayraktar et al., 2015).

The psychological and emotional consequences of cyberbullying represent the largest problem for the victim (Dredge et al., 2014; Jang et al., 2014). Exposure to such incidences has been linked to depressive symptomology, suicidal ideation, low self-esteem, anxiety and loneliness, self-harming behaviour (Bauman et al., 2013; Bonanno and Hymel, 2013; Cénat et al., 2014; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Stapinski et al., 2014). Sometimes, cyber victims experience anger, sadness, fear, and humiliation. They also feel unsafe, helpless, and excluded. Long-term consequences of cyberbullying include hyperactivity, conduct issues, low pro-social behaviours, smoking, intoxication, and psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches (Sourander et al., 2010), abdominal pain, and sleeping problems, weight loss or gain (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Jang et al., 2014), lower academic achievement (Cassidy et al., 2013; Foody et al., 2015), and cyber victims are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour later on in life (Lodge, 2010).

School climate is believed to be an important risk factor where a poor sense of belonging to the school has been linked to cyberbullying (Wong et al., 2014). Also, Buelga et al. (2016) emphasized the family predictor factors of cyberbullying: “authoritarian parental style and excessive use of punishment, permissiveness and tolerance of offspring’s aggressive behaviour, inconsistent, ineffective discipline, which can be too slack or too severe, lack of parental affection, support, and implication, family communication problems, conflicts between partners or between parents and children and use of violence at home to solve family conflict”. That is precisely why a systemic psycho-educational intervention is necessary to

encompass all the factors involved in this phenomenon: the actors in the school/academic environment (pupils, students, teachers, and parents), the staff in the field of Information and Communications Technology, mental health professionals (clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, psychological counsellors, psychiatrists), and the wider community (Vandebosch, 2014, 2019).

### **Primary and Secondary Prevention and School/Psychological Counselling**

The logic of the psychotherapeutic intervention is similar to the medical one, in the sense that what is aimed at first is the primary prevention of cyberbullying. The main methods are represented by psychoeducational programmes that aim to decrease risk factors (gender: girls are more often victimized, younger age, internet experience: victims of cyberbullying tend to use the Internet more intensively, lower self-esteem, a higher level of Internet addiction, difficulties in engaging in social relationships) and increasing protective factors (Heirman et al., 2016). Many programmes use a digital game design that encourages learning and behavioural change among young people because these games carry intrinsic motivation, they can facilitate learning and behaviour change through, for example, feedback, practice, and reward, and they provide an appropriate fit for young people (Van Cleemput et al., 2015). Web-based intervention is also widely used because it develops online programmes that meet the specific needs of cyberbullying victims. For example, the “Let’s Not Fall into the Trap” Programme, which promotes the positive use of technology, has a prosocial perspective, facilitating the provision of online support, encouraging positive online behaviours, and involving peers as educators in face-to-face and cyber settings (Menesini et al., 2015). The strengths of this programme are giving equal consideration to both bullying and cyberbullying, greater emphasis on the bystander and victim roles, consideration of coping strategies, provision of peer-led face-to-face activities, increased focus on the ecological approach where teacher support of class activities is emphasised, and creation of a Facebook page which could complement the website’s forum.

Secondary prevention aims to reduce the impact of cyberbullying that has already occurred. At this stage, the most important people are the school and psychological counsellors who take care of both the victims of cyberbullying and the bullies, by using elements of psychological support. During this phase it is important that the students involved in the bullying process understand that they are not alone, that they have the support of adults who know how to act legally and psychologically, that there are support groups and people specialized in individual counselling with whom they can talk about emotional aspects, socialization, communication, self-esteem, ways of managing peer-relational difficulties etc.

These interventions can be semi-structured according to the principles of various scientific theories (e.g., systemic, cognitive-behavioural, Rogerian) or they can be very well structured, containing exercises and activities specifically adapted

to a certain problem. Such an example is The Cognitive Behavioural Based Cyberbullying Prevention Program (Korkmaz Yüksel & Çekiç, 2019), which proposes the following content elements: “(1) bullying and its types, effects of cyberbullying and its prevalence, roles of bullying and causes of cyberbullying; (2) thoughts about cyberbullying and cyber victimization; (3) safe online behaviours to prevent cyberbullying; (4) behavioural skills to avoid cyberbullying; (5) skills to avoid cyber victimization and what to do when cyber victimization occurs” (p.22). This programme has reduced the cyberbullying and cyber victimization levels of the participants, especially by raising the awareness of bullying cognition (sharing fewer photos and personal information, preferring safer websites) (Korkmaz Yüksel & Çekiç, 2019).

Some authors (DeSmet et al., 2018; Van Cleemput et al., 2014) emphasise the importance of increasing the effectiveness of anti-cyberbullying programs by using scientific theories that explain human behaviour, such as the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1989) and The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). This approach has already been successfully applied in some cyberbullying interventions by DeSmet et al. (2016), Jacobs, Völlink, Dehue & Lechner (2015), and Wölfer et al. (2014). The basic idea uniting these approaches is that it is important to know the determinants of cyberbullies’ behaviour and of bystanders’ and victims’ coping behaviours, as these apply to school students. Based on this evidence, the appropriate theory-based methods should be chosen to change the most relevant determinants of students’ behaviour (Kok et al., 2016). For instance, “to promote positive bystander behaviours amongst adolescents, it might be important to change their attitude of moral disengagement by using ‘scenario-based information’ or ‘mental imagery’ in a digital game, which is a concrete component that can be integrated in a whole school anti-cyberbullying program” (DeSmet et al., 2016).

Narrative communication “operates as a method and criterion that can change behavioural determinants such as: knowledge, attitudes, subjective norms and self-efficacy” (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Narratives are able to effect these changes in some audience members via processes of identification, transportation, and emotions, contrary to non-narrative approaches, such as statistical information or rational arguments.

There are more types of using the narrative method: (1) e-film (e.g., Let’s Fight it Together, Thompson, Robinson & Smith, 2011); (2) anti-cyberbullying programme including narratives, make a point of scheduling such follow-on activities. In Cyberprogram 2.0, for example, these real cases, which featured severe consequences, were used to “promote empathy towards victims; foster bystanders’ involvement; identify positive coping strategies for bullying/cyberbullying; analyse the aggressor’s behaviour and encourage active listening and cooperation” (Garaigordobil & Martínez-Valderrey, 2016). Students were divided into small groups, with each group receiving a card that presented a cyberbullying case (theft of a password, dissemination of an intimate personal video etc.). After analysing

their case, each group then discussed a range of ways to deal with the situation, choosing the most effective and constructive solutions from the victim's perspective. The ConRed Programme (Del Rey, Casas & Ortega, 2012, 2016) includes several sessions in which trainers and students try to formulate good answers to various topics of interest: "How do you use social networks? A good plan of action to become an expert. How do I feel doing different activities on the internet? How can the internet help me and others? How can I help others? What do we do on the internet and why it may be damaging? The advantages and disadvantages of social networks". In general, it is important to use real cyberbullying cases in the form of videos, news stories or case descriptions, which were consequently discussed by the audience. (3) photo-elicitation interviewing (PEI) is an alternative participatory method, besides the semi-structured interview, focus groups, and use of personal diaries (Pabian & Erreygers, 2019). This technique uses the images to trigger richer responses and memories during a research interview (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel, 2006; Meo, 2010) and to evoke different kinds of information (Harper, 2002). The inclusion of images might operate as a bridge between the distant social and cultural worlds of the researcher and the participants (Epstein et al., 2006).

### **Tertiary Prevention of Cyberbullying and Psychotherapy**

Tertiary prevention aims to soften the impact of chronic cyberbullying that has intense lasting effects. This is done by helping people manage long-term, often-complex personal and interpersonal problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, chronic distress, dysfunctional and suicidal thoughts etc.) in order to improve their ability to function, their quality of life and sometimes, their life expectancy as much as possible. In this phase when the students face extremely intense emotional experiences that they feel they can no longer manage by voluntarily applying the methods learned at school with the counsellor, or when they are caught in the mental trap of helplessness or victimization, scientific psychotherapeutic support (online or face-to-face) is absolutely necessary.

### **Online Psychotherapy**

Considering that some Internet users are socially isolated and that they may look to the Internet for help or solutions (Li, 2007; Mesch, 2009), an online intervention would help victims deal with the psychological trauma of being cyberbullied. Cyberspace is the perfect location to offer interventions for individuals struggling with the consequences of a cyberbullying incident.

For example, Online Pestkoppenstoppen focuses on the analysis of the link between thought-emotion-behaviour, offers models for identifying irrational thoughts and for building more rational cognitive alternatives, and develops the themes of coping mechanisms and safe ways to use technology (Jacobs et al., 2015). These authors developed "an online programme, which specifically aims to

promote wellbeing among cyber victims and to decrease some of the associated internal and external behaviours such as school problems and truancy. The intervention, which is entirely interactive in its design, teaches cyber victims how to recognize, dispute and replace irrational thoughts with rational thoughts” (p. 12). The focus is to teach victims how to cope with their particular problematic psychological content (e.g., negative thoughts about themselves) the programme also providing information for prevention. The therapeutic grounding is partly based on the concepts of Relational Emotive Therapy (REBT; Ellis, 1995) which teaches victims how to notice the connection between a thought, feeling and behaviour (Jacobs et al., 2015).

Psychological therapies have been consistently shown to be very effective in helping individuals of all ages to deal with distress, anxiety, or depression and in recent years, internet-based psychological treatment has developed impressively, boosted by the COVID pandemic as well (Hedman et al., 2011). Indeed, many therapies have been moved online, where consultation with a therapist takes place via mobile phones, Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom etc. For example, Andersson et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of recent literature and found that there are no significantly different results between Internet-based CBT (ICBT) and face-to-face CBT in clinical populations.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2012) is one of the third wave of mindfulness-based cognitive-behavioural therapies, which has shown positive results in a range of populations, including individuals suffering from depression, anxiety, and psychosis (Arch et al., 2012; Hayes et al., 2006). Recent studies have also demonstrated the utility of online ACT applications (Hesser et al., 2014). ACT includes a set of behavioural principles whereby the client is encouraged to defuse from their psychological content and engage in value-oriented behaviours (Hayes et al., 2012). Mindfulness techniques, goal clarification, and acceptance exercises are all integrated together to move the client from avoidance behaviour to value-based actions even in the presence of negative private events. The design of the ACT package is distinct from other therapies because of the six core processes that lend themselves to being manipulated easily into an online therapy. These include: defusion, acceptance, and contact with the present moment, self as context, values and committed action (Hayes et al., 2006). These processes are directly relevant to both cyberbullies and victims. For example, acceptance is about creating space for emotions, impulses, and feelings that we might otherwise suppress or avoid (McMullen et al., 2008; Hayes et al., 2012). In a cyberbullying situation, Self as Context exercises are necessary for victims to become aware of the impact harassment is having on their psychological content and to then notice the extent to which their internal world is influencing their behaviour. This is essential before an individual can take the necessary steps to stop the bullying. Self as Context is the understanding that experiences, thoughts, and feelings are only content that is ever-changing. They don't fundamentally

impact the core self. In other words, no matter how you feel, think, or see yourself at the moment, you are still you.

As with other concepts of ACT, the clinicians' goal is to help patients increase their psychological flexibility so they can become unstuck from negative thoughts and behaviour patterns. These changes happen when an individual can be mindful and aware of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, observe them, and accept that they are *only* thoughts, feelings, and emotions that can be altered. By connecting the patient with their core sense of self, we use "self" as an instrument for therapeutic change.

Furthermore, the value-based exercise is important for this population when trying to engage bystanders and encourage them to take more responsibility when witnessing a bullying incident online. For instance, Nash (2022) adapts specific techniques from ACT therapy for young people to make them easy to apply. There are value-based exercises with auditory support or worksheets, small videos with cartoon characters, or explanatory schemes. Below is an example of such an exercise taken from Nash's website, named *Exercise Ranking Your Values and Finding Your Life Deviation Score*. Its aim is to prioritize values and areas of your life (friends, relationships, school, self-growth, spiritual life etc.) that remain unfulfilled as those in need of further development. The steps are: "(1) Rate the importance (A) of each value in each domain on a scale of 1 to 10 – with 1 meaning not at all important and 10 extremely important; (2) Rate each value according to how much fulfilment (B) that valued life domain brings to your life right now on a scale of 1-10, with 1 meaning no fulfilment and 10 meaning total fulfilment; (3) Subtract the second rating from the first (A-B) and see what you are left with. This number represents your life deviation score in each valued life domain. Compute the total by adding up all the scores from all valued life domains and subtract the second total from the first total to obtain your overall life deviation score. The higher that number, the more your life needs to change in that area, to bring it in line with what you really care about. High numbers in the life deviation column are a sign and source of suffering".

To help understand the difference between functional and dysfunctional mechanisms, Nash (2022) proposes the exercise named *The Clean and Dirty Discomfort Diary*. Sometimes the difference between the ordinary discomfort that arises in the course of living and encountering problems (initial reaction), versus the discomfort that develops because of the use of avoidance and control strategies (what we did with our first reaction and the level of secondary distress) is called clean versus dirty discomfort in ACT. The easiest way to appreciate this difference is to keep a clean versus dirty discomfort diary for a week, following the steps mentioned before:

1. Describe the situation - what happened to cause your discomfort?
2. What was your initial reaction? What did you think or feel? What immediately 'showed up' in the way of thoughts, feelings, and sensations?

3. *On a scale of 1 to 10 where 0 = none and 10 = extreme, what was your level of distress?*

4. *What actions did you take to avoid the discomfort? Did you struggle with things you didn't like? Did you criticize or bully yourself? Did you try to shove your reactions back or pretend they weren't there? Did you try to distract yourself with food, alcohol, smoking, TV, etc.?*

5. *On a scale of 1 to 10 where 0 = none and 10 = extreme, how did your distress level change after your distractive action?*

Systemic psychotherapy could also become of great interest in cyberbullying because it proposes an approach based on circular causality and understanding of the behaviour of the aggressor and the victim in various contexts (family, school, friends). In this way, we can understand the pluri-systemic factors that influence the behaviour of both people involved in the cyberbullying cycle, creating an intervention at the meso- and macro-systemic levels.

A specific form of systemic psychotherapy is multidimensional family therapy (MDFT), which has already been applied to adolescents with various behavioural problems (juvenile delinquency, addictions etc.) (Liddle & Rigter, 2013). This therapy emphasizes the central role of the family in understanding and treating youth problems. A thorough assessment of family functioning includes mental status, emotional functioning, personal and social history, the main activities of each individual, as well as the role each member plays in the family. Therapists stimulate family interaction on important topics, observing how individuals contribute to the adolescent's life and taking into account current circumstances.

Also, during the first two sessions, the therapists meet in turn with the adolescent, the parent(s) and other family members. One-on-one meetings reveal each family member's unique perspective, how events occurred (e.g., difficulties in school and family relationships, cyberbullying), what they have done to address the issues, what they think needs to change about the young people and the family, as well as the specific concerns and problems of each parent, indirectly related to the adolescent. The therapist presents a detailed picture of the severity and nature of the cyberbullying and the youth's life circumstances, personal beliefs and attitudes about bullying, family history, peer relationships, school and legal problems, any other factors in the social context and important life events. Also, the therapist understands the value system of the family and the adolescent. The therapeutic conversations also outline an ecological map (housing, relationships with classmates, time spent online and offline), but also specific aspects related to the context in which cyberbullying takes place, the emotions felt, specific thoughts, the attitude towards the victim, reasons etc.

In individual sessions with parents and separately with young people, parenting practices, house rules, family time and expectations regarding family issues are evaluated and discussed in detail. In family sessions, clinicians observe and participate in parent-youth discussions, listening for points of view, critical

incidents, references to significant past events, ways of solving problems, coping styles, attachment, and communication styles.

Based on this data and the therapeutic relationship of trust, a set of behavioural changes is implemented, with the help of the family, the group of friends and other human resources in the community.

### **Face-to-face psychotherapy based on CBT**

A psychotherapeutic program based on CBT could include the following aspects: (1) stimulating and developing self-esteem by creating a favourable climate of communication and interaction in which self-knowledge of one's own needs and obligations is achieved; identifying and capitalizing on personal resources, overcoming obstacles; becoming aware of and removing the causes that generate fears, frustrations, prejudices and personal inhibitions; (2) anxiety management skills training that includes: learning and practicing relaxation, meditation and breathing techniques to relieve physical and muscular tensing and emotional tensions; techniques for restructuring and modifying the unrealistic and negative thoughts and attitudes that underlie anxiety; problem solving and decision making techniques; ways of transforming avoidance behaviour into active problem-solving behaviour (Holdevici, 2002).

To achieve these therapeutic goals, the following can be used: (1) expressive and creative techniques (drawing, collage, making up stories, emotional carousel, elements of play therapy, elements of drama therapy, expression through movement, expression through dance, musical improvisation); (2) body awareness exercises (autogenic training, Jacobson's progressive muscle relaxation). Human beings have an inherited reflex to react to stress or threat, known as the "fight or flight" response. Part of this response involves activating muscle tension, which helps us multitask in a more dynamic and efficient manner. Under normal circumstances, muscles do not remain permanently at a high level of tension, but tense or relaxed according to the needs of the person. If you remain tense after demanding or stressful periods have passed, you are more alert than you should be, and this type of alertness turns into restlessness and anxiety. Constant tensions lead to excessive sensitivity, and people react to increasingly insignificant events as if they were threatening. By learning to relax, you can control these feelings of anxiety. To keep your anxiety, emotions, and general physical condition under control, it is important to learn how to relax. For this, you need to recognize the tension, completely relax your body and certain muscles. In order to be able to practice relaxation, it is important to first learn how to consciously monitor muscle tension (how tense am I, on a scale from 1 to 10) and then to practice progressive muscle relaxation in order to cause a decrease in muscle tone for each muscle group; (3) awareness exercises with imaginative support and cognitive restructuring (guided imagery technique, reduction and integration techniques) (Holdevici, 2002).

The purpose of graded exposure is to overcome avoidance and break the association between dysfunctional fear and specific situations, such as switching on the computer and checking emails or accessing social networks. This technique involves drawing up a list of specific goals, ranging from a moderate degree of difficulty to a very difficult one. Break these goals down into small, simpler steps that allow you to reach your goal little by little.

Notice that the first goal belongs to an individual who is afraid of travelling by subway. To be able to eliminate this fear, you need to start with (1) short train trips, one station above ground, and (2) uncrowded trains. Then, gradually, you can increase the number of stations, the number of people on the train, and finally travel by subway through the underground stations.

The number of steps involved depends on the task's level of difficulty. In order to simplify the steps outlined above, you could undertake them in the company of a friend or partner at first, and then alone. Use this method to reach your goals more easily. You should also consider the practicalities of how to organize exposure tasks and keep in mind the 75 percent rule: taking on the activities that you are 75% sure about.

It is important to recognize that maladaptive thought patterns are habits that can be changed through effort and practice. Identifying the maladaptive beliefs associated with anxiety is the first step towards changing the way you think, and it is essential to developing logical and healthy thinking.

This technique involves four important steps:

*Step 1: Identifying the thoughts that cause anxiety*

It can be more difficult at first to identify the thoughts that are causing anxiety, especially if they have been present for a long time. In situations where you feel anxious or uncomfortable, ask yourself: How do I feel about myself? What am I afraid will happen? What do I think about this situation? How do I think I will do it?

Cognitive distortions that cause anxiety:

1. Overestimating the probability that something catastrophic will happen.
2. Underestimating one's own ability to face situations
3. Confusion of normal physical sensations with those related to anxiety or serious illness.

Positive thinking does not simply mean thinking positive thoughts all the time, it does not reject all negative thoughts, but looks at things in the most constructive way possible, depending on the circumstances. That is why it is important to distinguish between positive thinking and catastrophic thinking.

Here are some pointers to help clarify this distinction:

*Negative thinking:*

- I must...
- I am forced to...
- If ... (something were to happen) ... it would be a disaster...

- I couldn't stand it if...

*Positive thinking*

- I would like to...

- I would prefer not to...

- It is unlikely that ... (something)... will actually happen.

• If things don't go my way, I might be disappointed, but I'll probably manage.

### *Step 2: Challenging anxiety-causing thoughts*

One of the best ways to deal with negative thoughts is to write them down on paper and replace them with more useful or rational alternatives.

Here are some important questions that can help in this regard:

1. What are the arguments that justify my fear?
2. How likely is it that the things I fear will actually happen?
3. What is the worst thing that can realistically happen?
4. What alternatives are there?
5. How useful is the way I think?

### *Step 3: Alternative explanations*

Through the process of challenging negative thoughts, you may have already begun to produce more positive thoughts.

Here are the four types of questions that can clarify the negative aspects of thoughts:

1. "What is the evidence that supports my thoughts?" Ask yourself if other people would accept this thought as valid. Drawing on your and other people's experience, what is the evidence that what you believe is true? Ask yourself if you are jumping to conclusions based on insufficient evidence. How do you know that what you are thinking is correct?

2. "What alternatives am I considering?" Is this the only thought I can have? There are probably other explanations of an event or other ways of thinking about something. I decide whether there is more conclusive evidence for alternative explanations or whether they would be more helpful in overcoming your feelings.

3. "What is the effect of the way I think?" Set your goals in your mind and then ask yourself if the way you think helps you achieve them or takes you even further away from them.

4. "What cognitive distortions am I engaging in?"

The most frequent cognitive distortions include:

a) Dichotomous (*all-or-nothing*) thinking: this is black-and-white thinking, where things are seen as either all good or all bad, safe or dangerous - there is no middle ground.

b) Overgeneralizations – *the use of ultimatums* - avoid using words like "always," "never," "everybody," "nobody," "everything," or "nothing." Ask yourself if the situation is really as clear-cut as you imagine.

c) Labelling – *condemning yourself based on a single event*: because there is one thing you couldn't do, you consider yourself a failure.

d) *Focusing on your weaknesses and omitting your strengths* - think of other times when you have tried or even succeeded and focus on the resources you have.

e) Catastrophizing – *overestimating the probability of a disaster* - things are certainly going badly and there are dangers in the world, but aren't you overestimating them? How likely is it that what you expect will happen?

f) *Exaggerating the importance of events*. We often think that an event will be much more important than it turns out to be. Ask yourself: "What will matter in a week or in ten years? Will I feel the same then?"

g) "Should" statements - *anxiety about the way things should be*. Telling yourself that things should be different or that you should act in a certain way indicates that you are worrying about how things "should" be, instead of facing them as they really are. Challenge the term "must." Why does it have to be this way? Why do I have to act this way?

h) *Pessimism about the inability to change a situation* leads to feelings of depression and low self-esteem. There may be no solution, but you won't know until you try. Ask yourself if you are really trying to find answers and solutions.

i) Fortune telling - *predicting the future*. Just because you acted a certain way in the past doesn't mean you have to act the same way always. To predict what you will do based on past behaviour is to rule out the possibility of changing yourself.

## Conclusions

Cyberbullying encompasses the performance of intentional harmful online conduct by means of technology-mediated communication (Kowalski et al. 2014).

Despite the efforts made especially in primary and secondary prevention through the development of numerous psychoeducation and counselling anti-cyberbullying programmes, the psychotherapeutic intervention in this area remains insufficiently validated.

Some anti-bullying interventions have a positive impact, but the literature is still divided on their utility for cyberbullying (Foody et al., 2015). There is a need for more access to individual psychological therapies and not just school or education-based programmes. Investigations of ACT, CBT and other types of psychotherapy should be considered a crucial step forward in cyberbullying research. In addition, further research is needed to compare online therapies (e.g., ICBT and IACT) to see which one has the biggest impact in terms of distress alleviation, in addition to increasing valued behaviour. This latter point is important, because these interventions also have the potential to act as preventative measures for future cyberbullying incidences, by encouraging responsibility in bystanders and reducing victim-blaming.

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# THE BIDIRECTIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CYBERBULLYING AND THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

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## **Introduction**

Cyberbullying is a prevalent issue in today's public discourse, but the problem is definitely not new. In fact, the fear that using an online environment to communicate may lead to mistreatment and harassment first appeared in the late 1980s, once the first local area networks were implemented. However, the term "cyberbullying" became relevant decades later, at the beginning of the new millennium, when it started being used by North American politicians and lawyers (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Since then, the prevalence of cyberbullying has grown due to the increasing accessibility of mobile devices that allows more and more people to use the Internet (Brochado et al., 2016). According to one study, the prevalence of being a cyber victim at least once in a lifetime ranged from 4.9% to 65%, while the prevalence of being a cyber aggressor at least once ranged from 1.2% to 44.1% (Brochado et al., 2016). In Romania, the rate of cybervictimization is one of the largest in Europe, at 37.3% (Athanasίου et al., 2018).

As such, a noteworthy task is to correctly recognize what increases and decreases the risk of cyberbullying in order to create the proper prevention and intervention methods. Among others, one recent review identified the family as acting as both a protective and a risk factor for cyberbullying, for the victims, as well as for the perpetrators (Kowalski et al., 2019).

In this chapter we will follow the family's role in cyberbullying, starting from the theoretical models that include it and continuing with a slew of recent empirical findings from the same domain. Also, despite the scarcity of literature, we will also cover the implications and consequences cyberbullying has on families. The family represents the main environment where the children develop, and the relationship between parents and children has received important attention over the years. Past studies showed that many family-related variables are linked with the development of aggression (Katz & Gottman, 1996). As such, it is to be expected that a warm and welcoming family environment would be related to fewer aggressive behaviours, in contrast to a more negative one, which would be more appropriate for the development of aggression-related issues. Among them, cyberbullying is an important problem for young people nowadays, and in the first parts of this chapter, after differentiating between this online form of aggression and traditional bullying, we focus on the ways in which the family

environment shapes cyberbullying, using theoretical as well as empirical proof. Certainly, having children that are victims or aggressors on the Internet can create some strain on the family (Buelga et al., 2016). We are also interested in how cyberbullying can impact a family's functioning. Finally, since the family can play a crucial role in such issues, we verify if there are some interventions specific to family therapy that can counter cyberbullying.

### **Differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). The act has an extensive series of similarities with traditional bullying, but also noteworthy differences. For the former, both represent aggressive behaviours, are intentional (thus their aim is to hurt the victim), are repeated and carried on by the individuals that are most defenceless against the aggression. As for the differences, the perpetrators of cyberbullying have greater chances to remain unknown, although these are not as large in reality as they would believe (it is nearly impossible to remain truly anonymous on the Internet, but it is still hard to find out one's identity) (Kowalski et al., 2019). Also, in traditional bullying, there is usually a difference in power between the aggressor and the victim (physical or social), while in cyberbullying, this difference is mostly non-existent. Finally, in cyberbullying, aggression can easily spread, it can start from one individual, and through the virality of sharing online information, it can end up involving entire communities (real or virtual) who can partake in cyberbullying (Snakenborg et al., 2011).

Other authors argue that escaping from cyberbullying is harder compared to traditional bullying. For students, most bullying acts happen at school, and going home can represent a release for the victims. However, in the case of cyberbullying, there is no such thing as “safe haven”, because the aggressor has access to the victim everywhere and at any time (Forssell, 2016; Kowalski et al., 2019). Thus, cyberbullying cannot be seen as a subtype of bullying. Instead, it is a different variant, with its own particularities and its own theoretical models.

### **Theoretical models of cyberbullying and the role of the family**

Over the years, various theories have been used to explain cyberbullying. Some of them were based on the classical theories of aggressive behaviours, such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and the General Strain Theory. The Theory of Planned Behaviour states that the best way to estimate behaviour is to study the intention of that behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). More specifically, for cyberbullying, this behaviour appears when the aggressor has a positive attitude toward cyber aggression, when the social norm is favourable (he/she has friends or family that support cyberbullying) and when the perceived behavioural control is strong

(performing the behaviour is seen as a relatively easy task) (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2013). The General Strain Theory suggests that deviant behaviour is the result of feeling negative emotions following exposure to strain (such as anger and stress) (Agnew, 1992). Cyberbullying can be both a source of strain and one of its outcomes. Thus, an individual can engage in cyberbullying as a result of the negative emotions he/she feels following traditional bullying or cyberbullying (this would be the case of those who are both victims and aggressors) or following other negative life events (bad grades, living in an unstable family environment, moving to a new school, and others) (Paez, 2018). Either way, cyber aggression would be a restorative action after feeling strong negative emotions.

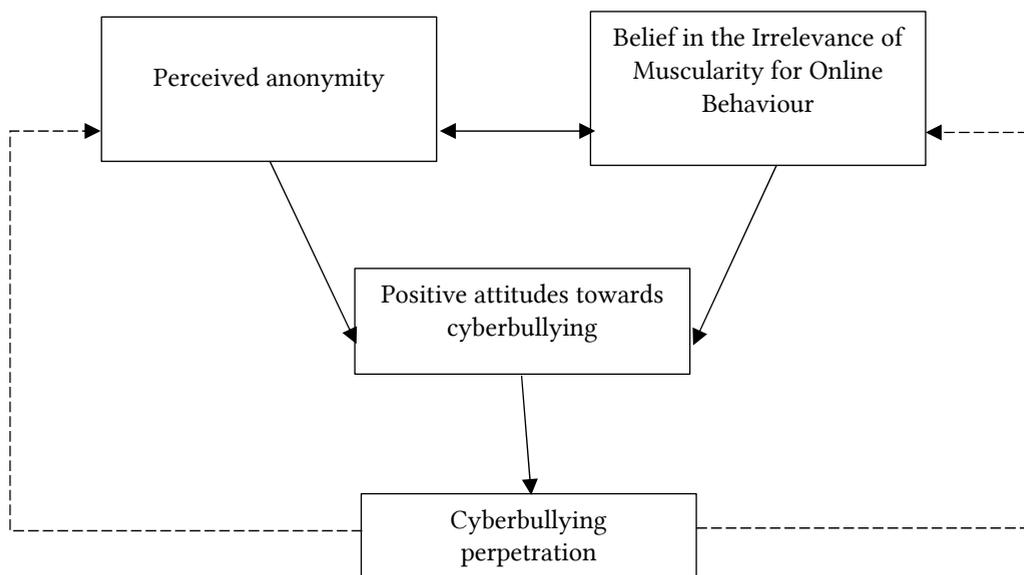
However, Barlett (2017) criticized these approaches, saying that they do not necessarily apply to the online environment, which is fundamentally different from the real one.

A study by Savage and Tokunaga (2017) verified whether the interaction between social skills, trait verbal aggression, and Internet self-efficacy can predict cyberbullying perpetration. Their results show that high social skills and low verbal aggression are responsible for an increase in cyberbullying perpetration only when these traits are accompanied by high Internet self-efficacy. On the contrary, in cases of low Internet self-efficacy, social skills and verbal aggression had no relationship with cyberbullying, showing that trust in one's Internet-related skills is necessary for involvement in cyberbullying. We can observe that, in this model, all the variables are individual rather than social. In order to include the part the family plays in the development of cyberbullying behaviour, more socially-relevant variables should be researched. Lazuras and colleagues (2013) tested whether social norms are related to cyberbullying. The results showed that when social norms are more permissive towards cyberbullying, the expectations of being involved in such behaviours are also higher. However, the authors tested the role of social norms belonging to the classmates and close friends of the respondents, not those of the family.

One model that includes the family when explaining cyberbullying is the one by Barlett and Gentile (2012). The model is displayed in Figure 1.

The authors explain their model using four postulates (Barlett, 2017). Firstly, in order to develop cyber-aggressive behaviour, a person must develop a level of self-efficacy in deploying such behaviour. With every online aggressive act, the perpetrator learns more about anonymity, the fact that size does not matter on the Internet, that online aggression leaves no physical mark, that he/she does not have to see the effect the aggression has on the victim, and that identification is rather hard. The second postulate states that once these steps are experienced, the aggressor develops positive attitudes towards cyberbullying. These attitudes can be reinforced by friends and family. At the same time, we can add that the family can intervene at this moment with the aim of preventing the positive attitude formation. However, more will be discussed in the next sections. Thirdly, these attitudes can be integrated into the perpetrator's personality and lead to increased

cyber-aggressive behaviours. The fourth postulate once again discusses the differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. One advantage of this model is the inclusion of various factors predicting cyberbullying, such as personality, social relationships and opportunities. It was also empirically tested and validated in a number of studies (Barlett & Gentile, 2012; Barlett et al., 2017), the first of which also shows a positive link between cyber aggression and cyber victimization.



**Figure 1.** The Barlett and Gentile Cyberbullying Model (after Barlett, 2017)

The Barlett Gentile model of cyberbullying (Barlett, 2007) offers a noteworthy role for families in the evolution of such behaviours. Families can reinforce cyberbullying attitudes, thereby extending them. In addition, many other studies test how some family-related variables can act as risk or protective factors against cyber victimization and cyber aggression.

### **Family-related contributions to cyber aggression**

Parenting was proposed as one possible factor, as past research shows a consistent relationship between parenting and cyberaggression. Garaigordobil and Machimbarrena (2017) compared the parenting profiles for children that are not involved in cyber aggression, those who are occasionally involved in such behaviours, and those who are severe cyber aggressors. The results showed that the parents of the last category of children had significantly lower scores in parental competence compared with the other two groups. Other studies showed

that authoritarian parenting is related to being a perpetrator of cyber aggression (Dehue et al., 2012; Floros et al., 2013; Gomet-Ortiz et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2019). Offering low warmth and imposing high control seems to be maladaptive for children, but one study adds a new dimension to the issue. Katz and colleagues (2019) observed that, beyond using a general controlling style, the parents who have children as aggressors also use more inconsistent control tactics regarding their children's use of the Internet.

Having a good relationship with the family is generally seen as a crucial protective factor against cyber aggression. In general terms, relational quality is linked with lower cyberbullying perpetration (Livazovici & Ham, 2019). At the same time, more specific aspects of the relationships between the family members have positive effects too. Family cohesion was related to a reduced implication in cyberbullying, regardless of the role (Arato et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Perceived family love decreases cyberbullying perpetration (Grunin et al., 2020). Similarly, clear family rules were associated with lower cyber aggression (Martins et al., 2016).

Being exposed to a negative family influence has, however, opposing effects. When family affection is low and family incivility is high, the children also develop more cyber aggression (Alvarez-Garcia et al., 2018; Bai et al., 2020; Jin & Miao, 2021). Similarly, negative communication patterns were related to cyberbullying (Alvarez-Garcia et al., 2018; Romeo-Abrio et al., 2019). However, the patterns differ based on the parent's gender, with avoidant communication with the mothers, and offensive communication with the fathers having stronger associations. More parental phubbing (when parents use their mobile phones for irrelevant purposes when interacting with their children) was also correlated with higher cyber aggression on the children's part (Wei et al., 2021). Finally, family violence is related to being a cyber aggressor (Low & Espelage, 2019).

### **Family-related contributions to cyber victimization**

As for the parents of the victims, those whose children were severely affected by cyberbullying had significantly higher scores for the permissive parenting style (Garaigordobil & Machimbarrena, 2017). At the same time, an authoritarian parenting style was also related to cyber victimization. High control is not enough to keep children out of danger, especially when it is correlated with low warmth (Gomet-Ortiz et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2019). When parents are not responsive to the needs and issues of their children and behave coldly towards them, they can even accentuate the cyber victimization due to their lack of appropriate responses.

Living in a quality family environment, with high levels of cohesion, is associated with lower cyberbullying victimization (Arato et al., 2022; Livazovici & Ham, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020). Also, receiving constant social support from other family members can lower cyberbullying victimization (Arato et al., 2022; Martins

et al., 2016), Parental use of social networks, especially when the parent and child are online friends, also lowers victimization (Mesch, 2018).

Not only can a good family environment help in the development of more adaptive online behaviours, but it can also buffer the relationships between cybervictimization and various negative outcomes. High family social support correlates with better well-being and lower depression for those who are victimized (Fanti et al., 2012; Hellfeldt et al., 2020). Also, life satisfaction with family decreases the impact of cyber victimization on suicide ideation (Chang et al., 2019). Finally, some specific behaviours are also useful. Having constant, even daily family dinners protects victimized teens' well-being and mental health (Elgar et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2019).

Being exposed to a negative family influence has, however, opposing effects. Many studies show that a deteriorated family environment and family dysfunction are associated with higher cyberbullying involvement as victims (Cassiani-Miranda et al., 2021; Martínez-Monteaagudo et al., 2019). Parental abuse and neglect were also predictors of cyber victimization (Hong et al., 2018). Also, family poly-victimization (having conflicts with siblings, experiencing child maltreatment, or intimate partner violence) was linked with more online victimization (Chen et al., 2018).

### **Profiles of the families of cyberbullies and victims**

Thus, based on all these results, we can draw a portrait of the families who have children involved in cyberbullying. In the case of aggressors, the parents are authoritarian, imposing high levels of control over the general activities of their children. Moreover, their levels of competence seem rather reduced, one proof of this situation being that they are inconsistent in the way they exercise their control over the child's online activities. The families of cyberbullies also show low levels of cohesion, love, and unclear rules. More concerning, maladaptive behaviours, such as violence, abuse, bad communication, and incivility, seem to be characteristics that remain constant among the families of aggressors. Thus, this family environment can act to reinforce the positive attitudes the child has towards aggression, and what is witnessed at home can spill over in the online environment.

In the case of victims, the parents are either too authoritarian or too permissive, not being very involved in their children's activities. Such behaviours create difficulties in communication between the children and parents. They can also use very low levels of supervision, being generally unaware of children's well-being. Not unlike the families of aggressors, the families of victims can also show low levels of cohesion and can suffer from various dysfunction. When the conflict inside the family is high, the children have greater chances of being victims of abuse outside the family as well, and cyber abuse is not excluded.

## **How cyberbullying can affect families**

There are few studies that directly addressed the effect cyberbullying has on the family environment. Also, the impact of finding out that a child is a cyber aggressor is still unstudied. This can be due to the fact that, when victims, most children and adolescents refuse to talk about their problems with their families. In addition, given that the aggressor remains anonymous, it is hard for the family to find out what their child has done.

One qualitative research found that cyber victimization negatively affects the relationships between children and their families (Kanwal & Hami, 2019). Children experienced a detachment from the family, some because they feared the family would find out about their problems, and others because they were snubbed by the family when they found out about the victimization. Also, upon discovering the incidents, some families increased the online surveillance of their children, but this affected their relationships with their friends too, thus leading to a decrease in social support. Another study found that young men can be especially at risk of weakening their relationships with their families. Some felt that their families would believe their need for support and assistance indicated weakness and would consider them too soft (Dennehy et al., 2020).

Other studies aimed to discover the family-related consequences of some specific forms of cyberbullying. A study that included interviews with the survivors of revenge porn found that the women's family lives were greatly affected by the events. Some of them were blamed by their relatives, while others found it harder to communicate with their family members because they closed most, if not all, of their social media accounts. Finally, others said that their aggressors found their family's accounts and started aggressing them too (Bates, 2017).

Finally, being a cyber victim or cyber aggressor is also related to suicide ideation and attempts (cyberbullying, compared to traditional bullying, has a stronger association with these outcomes). Also, being both a victim and an aggressor increases the risk of suicide attempts (Buman et al., 2013; John et al., 2018; van Geel et al., 2014). Experiencing a suicide in the family can be devastating for the parents and the siblings. Usually, after such an event, the family members have trouble finding the right ways to communicate, especially since many of them would experience serious self-blame, or would blame others. Also, due to the stigma associated with suicide, the family can even hide the true cause of the dead from other members, like younger brothers and sisters. This can lead to a general level of distrust in the family (accentuated by the possible blaming) and to various dysfunctions, both in the short term and in the long one (Cerel et al., 2008).

Thus, despite the scarcity of studies, the effects of cyberbullying on the family can be quite severe. Moreover, cyberbullying can also affect the family of the aggressor. Some parents might be legally responsible for their child's behaviours and can experience various legal or financial issues due to that behaviour.

## **Parental opinions on cyberbullying**

A few qualitative studies were interested in finding out the opinions and attitudes parents have on cyberbullying. More precisely, they received questions regarding their children's involvement in cyberbullying and what can be done to prevent it. Young and Tully (2018) found that parents had difficulties articulating normative behaviours regarding cyberbullying, regardless of their children's status as victims or aggressors. Some of them viewed the acts differently based on their severity, while others considered some cyberbullying as being normal, "girl stuff" or specific to a "boys being boys" type of behaviour.

The opinions of the parents differed based on the child's role in cyberbullying. Some of them said that they would investigate the reasons why their child was victimized, but at the same time, they would consider that he/she did something wrong and was partially responsible for the victimization.

On the contrary, they reported differently when talking about cyberaggression. While many parents considered that being a cyber aggressor can be discouraged by parental supervision, some of them viewed various cyberbullying acts as solely the responsibility of the child.

Monks and colleagues' (2016) results highlighted that parents were aware of the differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. They also expressed the idea that cyberbullying can follow a child at home, a place that was previously seen as a "safe heaven" for those involved in traditional bullying. Moreover, all the parents believed that supervision at home is essential in reducing their children's involvement in cyberbullying. In contrast, only a minority of them considered that supervision at school would be useful and have positive effects. However, parental supervision is not seen as straightforward behaviour. Parents considered they would encounter many hardships in finding the right balance between supervision and privacy. Also, some parents viewed a lax and overly permissive parenting style as being related to the child's becoming a bully. In the end, another concern for the parents was that children have more information about the online environment and are more accustomed to using it, thus becoming difficult for them to keep and offer proper supervision.

Parents also consider that communication is the key to preventing their children's involvement in cyberbullying, but the way they would use communication would be different based on the child's role. Helfrich and colleagues (2020) found out that parents try to increase children's empathy toward cyberbullying by promoting perspective-taking. Thus, they would lower their children's involvement as cyber aggressors. In addition, they also tried to empower their children and make them intervene and offer support to those who suffer due to cyberbullying.

In the same study, the parents talked about two types of monitoring: active (discussing their children's online activity only when a problem arises) and restrictive (using passwords and monitoring software to restrict their children's access to some sites). Finally, parents said they would seek professional help to deal

with cyberbullying. Still, their opinion about the availability of such help varied. Some parents would go to a physician, or a paediatrician, or read scientific articles on the Internet, while others considered that the help is limited or inexistent and believed that schools should help more (Helfrich et al., 2020).

### **Family therapy for cyberbullying**

Until now, we showed that the family environment can determine if and how the children get involved in cyberbullying. Moreover, this involvement can further shape family relationships, and the parents, although not always aware of the dangers of cyberbullying, are trying to understand and combat it. Thus, some interventions should target the family to reduce cyberbullying. However, the literature on family therapy used for bullying and cyberbullying is not extensive. There are some proposed interventions that also target families, but even these are rare. For example, Cross and colleagues (2015) discuss a general intervention framework that includes some family-level behaviours. They start from a social-ecological model of cyberbullying where, at the family level, parental online monitoring, parental understanding of the online environment, and the relationship with parents are factors that can influence the children's involvement in cyberbullying. The authors recommend that the parents build more online skills, appropriate online support behaviours and better communication strategies to help their children not engage in cyberbullying (as victims or aggressors). However, this framework also includes school-level, peer-level, online-level, and individual-level variables and is not specifically made to target families. Building resilience in youth seems to be another useful way to prevent cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). Other studies showed that adolescent individual resilience is positively linked with family-level resilience (Finklestein et al., 2020). Thus, developing family resilience could also impact and buffer the children's involvement in cyberbullying.

The number of studies describing the use of family therapy to combat traditional bullying is relatively higher (Byers et al., 2021), especially when speaking about the families of the bullies. Although these interventions do not target the online component, they can still offer some insights into how family therapy can be used in cyberbullying. For example, Healy and Senders (2014) used their Resilience Triple P model that fosters facilitative parenting with the aim of developing the children's peer relationships, helping them to better regulate their emotions, and addressing conflict. Other studies use a brief strategic family therapy intervention targeting the families of bullies (Nickel, Luley, et al., 2006; Nickel, Muehlbacher, et al., 2006) They first measure the conflict-resolution style of the family and then use the most appropriate strategies to cultivate a more adaptable style that would prevent the youth from expressing their aggressiveness through bullying. Finally, another study targeting the families of bullies promoted insight and coaching communication styles (Park et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, the absence of proper investigations into the effects family therapy has on cyberbullying makes us reserved about the previously mentioned

inventions. There is a stringent need for empirically validated therapeutic interventions, and given the importance of family-level variables in the process, some of them must come from the area of family therapy. However, on a more general note, the right amount of supervision from the parents, combined with a better understanding of the online environment can act against the children's involvement in cyberbullying. Also, fostering good communication and improving the conflict resolution strategies used in the family decreases the levels of aggression inside the families and, thus, can weaken the reinforcement for the positive attitudes toward cyberbullying as well as create less strain that can degenerate into cyber aggression.

## Conclusion

The family's role in cyberbullying is highlighted by theoretical models and empirical studies alike. Having a loving, cohesive, and supportive family environment is one crucial protective factor against online aggression as well as online victimization. On the contrary, harmful family practices, such as violence, abuse, or neglect, can foster the risk of cyberbullying involvement. Also, families can offer the ideal context where positive attitudes towards cyberbullying are reinforced. A very permissive or very authoritarian parenting style seems to be linked with the children's participation in cyberbullying. Unfortunately, despite the parents' being mostly aware of the dangers of cyberbullying, some of them can use inappropriate tactics when dealing with it. Monitoring, while being proffered by most parents, can act as a double-edged sword when the right balance with privacy is not found. The consequences of cyberbullying on the families of victims or aggressors are less studied. Still, the existing research shows that being involved in cyberbullying alienates individuals from their families. Most children have important difficulties in communication with their parents, and this puts a significant strain on the relationship. Notwithstanding the rich literature showing the links between family and cyberbullying, the number of interventions targeting specific family-related aspects is reduced. Those interested in how family therapy can reduce cyberbullying can find some interventions concerning traditional bullying, but further studies regarding online aggression are definitely needed.

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**CYBERBULLYING  
IN SOME EUROPEAN COUNTRIES –  
STUDIES**



# CYBERBULLYING IN PORTUGAL – A SCOPING STUDY

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## **Introduction**

Cyberbullying is a term defined in 2005 by Bill Belsey that makes the combination of the traditional bullying allied to the term cyber by implying the use of technologies to intentionally carry out repeated and hostile behaviours against an individual or group of individuals, with the cause of harm (Kowalski et al., 2014; Belsey, 2006). Hinduja and Patchin (2008) report that cyberbullying causes physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and emotional sequelae. This damage can cause introversion, low self-esteem, insecurity, and feelings of panic, depression, anguish, school failure or, in more severe cases, suicide.

In 2017, a UNICEF study revealed that 1 in 3 children claimed to have been victims of cyberbullying. In the study by Ponte and Batista (2019), 24% of Portuguese children and young people reported being victims of offline and online bullying in 2018. In Portugal, Amado et al. (2012) report, in a questionnaire to 339 students from the 6th, 8th and 11th years of schooling, that 15.6% of the respondents had already been the target of cyberbullying. In the analysis by EU Kids Online Portugal (2019), these values more than doubled in relation to 2010 and 2014.

Still in Portugal, according to António et al. (2020), in a study in which 485 students participated, 61.4% have been victims of cyberbullying, at least some, in the last 3 months (during the quarantine/distance learning period); 40.8% said they had been an aggressor, and 86.8% an observer.

## **Background**

In December 2010, a proposal was presented to the Portuguese Assembly of the Republic that advocated the criminalization of school bullying (Bill 46/XI/2). Subsequently, the Student Statute and School Ethics (Law No. 51/2012) defined a set of duties of the student aimed at preventing behaviours related to bullying and whose non-compliance causes the author to incur disciplinary infraction and in the possible application of corrective disciplinary measures (i) and (j) of Article 10). This statute also scans the obligations and duties of both parents and school principals in situations that call into question the “safety and physical and psychological integrity of all who participate in the life of the school”. In 2019, Order No. 8404-

C/2019, made effective the appointment of a working committee that had the function of supervising and promoting the project “School Without Bullying. School Without Violence.” This order explicitly defines that the school, along with the family, are privileged spaces in the prevention and fight against violence, namely bullying and cyberbullying.

In the current context, with an unparalleled use of the internet and digital resources, in which computers are distributed to all students of the Portuguese educational system as well as to all teachers, there is a simultaneous, exponential increase in cases of cyberbullying, as mentioned in the study by António et. Al (2020), in which of the 485 students participated and 61.4% said they had been the victim of cyberbullying, at least a few times, in the last 3 months. It is therefore important to understand this phenomenon and, above all, to prepare teachers, students, and parents with strategies to combat this problem. We decided, therefore, to prepare a scoping study, because we consider it relevant to know the state of the art at the level of academic publications in Portuguese about the situation of cyberbullying in Portugal.

## Method

According to Arksey and O’Malley (2005) a scoping study aims to quickly map out the key concepts that underpin a research area and the main sources and types of evidence available. This definition draws attention to the need for comprehensive coverage of the available literature, regarding the amount of data taken and analysed, referring to the fact that there may be different degrees of depth in different types of scoping study, as this depends on the purpose of the review itself. A scoping study can be carried out as a standalone project especially when an area is complex or has not been comprehensively researched. To note that the process should be documented in sufficient detail to enable the study to be replicated by others.

According to the authors it is possible to identify at least four reasons why a scoping study can be carried out: 1. To examine the extent, scope, and nature of the research activity; 2. To determine the value of conducting a complete systematic review; 3. To summarize and disseminate the results of the research; 4. To identify research gaps in existing literature.

Arksey and O’Malley (2005) also define that a scoping study should consist of 5 stages:

Stage 1: identifying the research question

Stage 2: identifying relevant studies

Stage 3: study selection

Stage 4: charting the data

Stage 5: collating, summarizing, and reporting the results

Thus, in **stage 1**, we defined our review question, to analyse, synthesize and present some data contained in the existing literature on the **state of the art**

**referring to academic publications in Portuguese related to cyberbullying in Portugal.**

Regarding **stage 2**, we define that, in our research, we will consider articles with quantitative approaches and qualitative approaches, because, according to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), educational research is disciplined research, using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Then, as databases for our research, we selected the Online Knowledge Library (b-on) because it allows access to scientific publications from research institutions and higher education being a reference in access to international scientific information. We also opted for the Portal of Scientific Repositories of Open Access in Portugal (RCAAP) because it collects, aggregates and indexes scientific content so long as it exists in the institutional repositories of national higher education entities, and other organizations. We decided to expand the search with the use of Google Scholar, to verify if this portal adds other amplitude studies that can contribute to better answer the review question.

In summary, in the three databases, the following results were achieved:

**Table 1.** Preliminary research results

|               | 1AND2         | 1AND3         | 1AND4         | 2AND3       | 2AND4       | 1AND2AND3   | 2AND3AND4  | ALL       |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| <b>B-ON</b>   | 8264          | 529           | 225           | 151         | 100         | 79          | 0          | 0         |
| <b>RCAAP</b>  | 103           | 144           | 1             | 48          | 0           | 20          | 0          | 0         |
| <b>GOOGLE</b> | 58 400        | 52 300        | 23 300        | 5250        | 4410        | 5550        | 478        | 39        |
| <b>TOTALS</b> | <b>66 767</b> | <b>53 040</b> | <b>23 526</b> | <b>5574</b> | <b>4510</b> | <b>5702</b> | <b>478</b> | <b>39</b> |

We then started **stage 3** and we set out the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

**Frame 1.** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

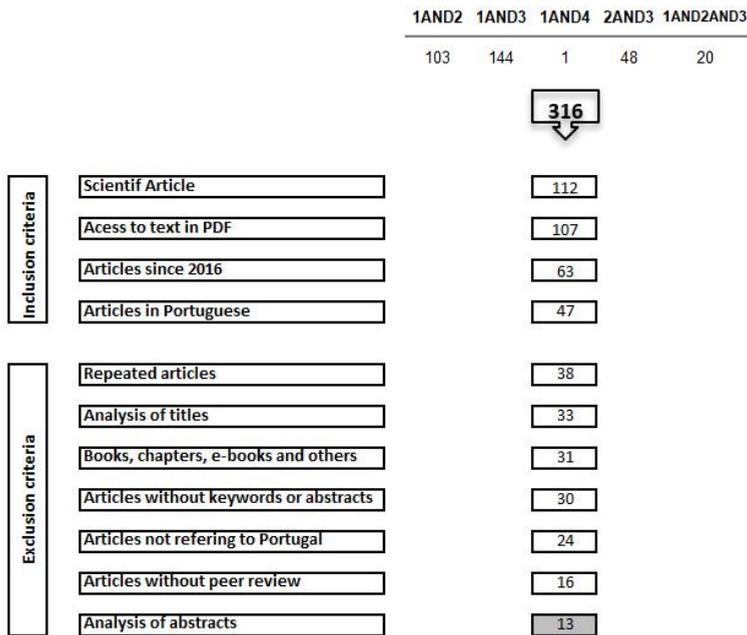
| <b>INCLUSION CRITERIA</b>         | <b>EXCLUSION CRITERIA</b>                                     |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE                | Exclude repeated articles.                                    |
| ACCESS TO FULL TEXT IN PDF FORMAT | Exclude articles by analysing titles.                         |
| ARTICLES SINCE 2016               | Exclude books, chapters, e-books, and theses                  |
| ARTICLES IN PORTUGUESE            | Exclude articles that do not have an abstract and/or keyword. |
|                                   | Exclude articles not referring to Portugal.                   |
|                                   | Exclude articles that do not explicitly mention peer review   |
|                                   | Exclude articles by analysing the abstracts of the articles.  |

After defining the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as Cherry and Dickson (2014) refer, we consulted an expert in the field, who suggested, since the volume of data to be analysed was impractical (in our case we had 159 636 results) to change the inclusion criteria for the date or restrict to only one database the research. Our option was to restrict one database and we selected the data obtained in RCAAP with following results:

**Table 2.** Results

|              | 1AND2 | 1AND3 | 1AND4 | 2AND3 | 2AND4 | 1AND2AND3 | 2AND3AND4 | ALL |
|--------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| <b>RCAAP</b> | 103   | 144   | 1     | 48    | 0     | 20        | 0         | 0   |

The flow diagram summarizing the review protocol and the compiled data is presented in *Figure 1*.



**Figure 1.** Revision Protocol (adapted from Moher, Tetzlaff and Altman, 2009)

As defined in **stage 4**, we charted the data. All data collected were organized through Excel grids so that data extraction was facilitated and their reading, and subsequent reference, was feasible, as reported by Fleeman and Dundar (2014).

We organize the descriptive data according to the order number resulting from our research, referring to the name of the articles, their year of publication and authors.

**Table 3.** Descriptive data  
(order number, name of articles, year of publication and authors)

| Nº | ARTICLE NAME  | YEAR | AUTHORS  |
|----|---|------|--|
| 1  | Ciber) Bullying: revisão sistemática da literatura  | 2021 | Gonçalves, Vitor ; Vaz, Cátia Emanuela Augusto   |
| 6  | A promoção de manifestações de bullying na escola: posicionamento dos alunos adolescentes portugueses | 2018 | Ceron Trevisol, Maria Teresa; Pereira, Beatriz Spies, Dandara Isabela; Mattana, Patrícia   |
| 7  | Associação entre bullying escolar e o país de origem: um estudo transcultural                         | 2019 | Zequinão, Marcela Almeida; Medeiros, Pâmella de; Lise, Fábio Augusto; Trevisol, Maria Teresa Ceron; Pereira, Beatriz                           |
| 2  | Bullying e cyberbullying em idade escolar   | 2016 | Seixas, Sónia Raquel Pereira Malta Marruaz; Fernandes, Luís; Morais, Tito  |
| 3  | Bullying e Cyberbullying: ameaça ao bem-estar físico e mental dos adolescentes                        | 2018 | Araújo, João Diogo Oliveira Caldeira, Maria do Rosário   |
| 9  | Bullying na adolescência: causas e comportamentos de alunos portugueses e brasileiros                 | 2019 | Ceron Trevisol, Maria Teresa Pereira, Beatriz Mattana, Patrícia  |
| 10 | Bullying na escola: causas e posicionamentos de alunos portugueses e brasileiros                      | 2017 | Ceron Trevisol, Maria Teresa; Pereira, Beatriz Mattana, Patrícia   |
| 4  | Bullying, cyberbullying e problemas de comportamento: o género e a idade importam?                    | 2019 | Carvalho, Marina; Branquinho, Cátia Sofia dos Santos; Matos, Margarida Gaspar de   |
| 14 | Cyberbullying: Motivos da agressão na perspetiva de jovens portugueses                                | 2017 | Caetano, Ana; Amado, João; Martins, Maria José D.; Freire, Isabel; Veiga Simão, Ana; Pessoa, Teresa  |
| 15 | Emoções no cyberbullying: um estudo com adolescentes portugueses                                      | 2016 | Caetano, Ana; Freire, Isabel; Veiga Simão, Ana Martins, Maria José D.; Pessoa, Teresa  |
| 11 | Jogos antibullying: a perceção dos professores e educadores portugueses                               | 2020 | Vaz, Cátia   |
| 12 | Número Temático: Estudos sobre Bullying em Portugal   | 2017 | Almeida, Ana Maria Tomás de Correia, Isabel  |
| 5  | Vitimização pelo bullying em três países: um estudo transcultural                                     | 2019 | Zequinão, Marcela Almeida; Medeiros, Pâmella, Silva, Jorge Luiz; Skrzypiec, Grace; Trevisol, Maria Teresa Ceron; Lopes, Luís; Pereira, Beatriz |

As Arksey and O'Malley (2003) say, **stage 5** of a scoping study involves collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. Consequently, we then established our categories and subcategories of analysis

### **i. The aggravating factor of cyberbullying**

According to Seixas et al. (2016), communication mediated by a screen has its own characteristics that serve as enhancers and aggravating factors in the case

of cyberbullying, in which interlocutors feel that there is a minimization of authority. This communication context allows a growing disinhibition, more relaxed and with less formality than the real and face-to-face context, enabling anonymity and the illusion of invisibility. At the same time, the aggressor does not have the same access to the victim's reactions as in the real context, which may cause him even less empathy or remorse for the victim.

To Seixas et al. (2016), the fact that when digital content is accessible online can be searched and used freely, repeatedly and without contextualization, further aggravate the problem of cyberbullying. In addition, you don't control the audience that sees online aggression and that, unlike face-to-face bullying that is restricted to a space-time, cyberbullying can happen at any time and anywhere because both aggressors and victims are permanently connected to their mobile devices. Also, Araújo and Caldeira (2018) follow the same line of thought, stating that cyberbullying can exert its effects on the victim at anytime and anywhere, thus being a constant pressure.

Seixas et al. (2016) also argue that the relationship of power inequality inherent in bullying can gain another perspective in the case of cyberbullying, because it is no longer about the aggressor being the strongest physically, but rather the one with the greatest technological expertise.

For Araújo and Caldeira (2018) cyberbullying is a more complex and violent form of aggression and may even serve as a continuation of face-to-face bullying. For the authors, as occurs in a virtual world, the aggressor feels unpunished, unsupervised, and invisible so he can go beyond all limits.

According to Caetano et al. (2016) there are very important factors of impunity and anonymity, together with the face-to-face removal, which allow the aggressor to perpetuate their behaviour because, not visualizing the reactions and suffering of the victim, this minimizes feelings of guilt and remorse, combined with the lack of consequence of their acts. Following this line of thinking, these authors also state that aggressors, due to the context of cyberspace, develop a reduced sensitivity to empathy and suffering of others.

For Caetano et al. (2017) for the new generations that are continuously linked to cyberspace, in which everything happens very fast, almost instantaneously, the aggressors justify their behaviours as play, fun, escape from boredom, pleasure for pleasure, which will imply serious consequences at many levels and particularly in the communicational, moral, and ethical development both the victim and the aggressor.

Taking into account the specific characteristics of cyberbullying, Seixas et al. (2016) state that victims may present a more oppressive symptomatology, both physically, mentally, and socially, than in cases of traditional bullying.

**Table 4.** Category “The aggravating factor of cyberbullying” (evidence)

| Nº | EVIDENCE  |
|----|---|
| 2  | “Young victims of cyberbullying assume a more serious and insidious character, and may trigger more intense, disturbing and more physical, psychological and social risk symptoms.”               |
| 3  | “Cyberbullying unquestionably represents a more complex form of bullying and, in many cases, can emerge as the continuation of face-to-face bullying”   |
| 15 | “In the case of cyberbullying, aggressors will be better protected, given the anonymity of this behaviour, and unaware of the reactions of victims, which “protects” them from feelings of guilt” |
| 14 | “The prevalence of hedonistic motives, associated with emotions of pleasure and fun, and the possible processes of moral disengagement”   |

### ii. Teacher training

According to Gonçalves and Vaz (2021), teacher training is one of the ways to follow, thus investing in the primary prevention of cyberbullying, easing teachers with knowledge and strategies that make it possible to identify behaviours and, in a timely manner, act. According to the authors, their studies suggest the lack of specific training for the educational community.

Also, Carvalho et al. (2019) and Trevisol et al. (2018) state that it is necessary to develop skills in those who are responsible for formal education, so that professionals can recognize and intervene in cases of bullying and cyberbullying.

In studies conducted by Vaz (2020) most teachers report that bullying is currently a worrying problem in schools, but that they never had specific training in this area, although they felt the need for this same training. Thus, the author states that it is essential to develop conceptual training in teachers to face bullying, since they are the ones that can more easily prevent and detect this problem in the school environment.

**Table 5.** Category “Teacher training” (evidence)

| Nº | EVIDENCE   |
|----|--|
| 1  | "Teacher training is the key"  |
| 10 | "It is necessary that the adults responsible for this context be attentive to identify them and intervene with them (...) Have knowledge to guide students, schools, families and society in general about the risks and consequences of bullying" |
| 11 | "In this sense, teacher training is essential, because they are the ones who can prevent and detect this problem more easily in schools"   |

### iii. Intervention programs

According to Araújo e Caldeira (2018) and Carvalho et al. (2019) it is necessary to develop intervention projects, based on public policies in the

Education and Health areas, in the school and community context, centred into the socio-emotional aspects that involve the capacities and competencies of empathy, so that young people are aware of the phenomenon of cyberbullying and its consequences. For the authors, cyberbullying is a complex and difficult-to-control phenomenon that awareness-raising campaigns are needed, involving students and families, so that they can anticipate and avoid the harms of cyberbullying.

Trevisol et al. (2018) also concluded that prevention and intervention actions are needed, based on programs that promote the development of the formation of the human dimension of students and their relationships, with a view to preventing and intervening the effects of bullying. In these programs, according to Trevisol et al. (2017), all actors should be part of the victim, aggressor, spectator, in the sense that everyone feels that the quality of relationships of coexistence at school is a common task.

Caetano et al. (2017) state that it is necessary to develop an effective digital citizenship, which breaks the cycle of associated violence in order to prevent cyberbullying and some of the causes that are at its origin. Dealing with and discouraging with cyberbullying will involve the design and implementation of through intervention projects, which must include all stakeholders: students, teachers, and parents, in a systemic approach (Caetano et al., 2016).

In the form of a summary, Zequinão et al. (2019) report that the literature proves the effectiveness of school bullying intervention projects, referencing the world-renowned *KiVa Antibullying Program* and *the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*.

**Table 6.** Category “Intervention programs” (evidence)

| Nº | EVIDENCE  |
|----|---|
| 3  | “In this sense, it is urgent to carry out information and awareness campaigns in schools and for families”  |
| 4  | “Development of and/or adaptation of prevention programs, focused on socio-emotional aspects involving empathy skills and competences.”   |
| 6  | “Organization of prevention and intervention actions in relation to the problem of bullying at school”  |
| 5  | “(…) programs effectively reduce school bullying in relation to aggression (approximately 19-20%) and victimization (15-16%) (…)”   |
| 9  | “Prevention and intervention work with all those involved in the problem: victim, aggressor, spectator, finally, with the school collective, so that everyone feels responsible for ensuring the quality of the relationships of coexistence in the school space” |
| 14 | “It is necessary to consider an intervention that seeks to prevent cyberbullying and some of its causes, but also break the cycle of violence”  |
| 15 | “Therefore, it is necessary to develop intervention projects based on in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon, in a systemic approach in which everyone is involved”   |

#### iv. The game

From Vaz’s perspective (2020) the use of play as an instrument that enables the development of critical thinking, cooperative work and problem solving will be a form of primary prevention of the scourge of cyberbullying. The use of educational games as a strategy to combat violence in the school context should act as an instrument for primary prevention and awareness of children. Gonçalves and Vaz (2021) follow the same line of thought, in which the game can be an important ally in the fight against cyberbullying, referencing the digital resources available on platforms that aimed at the primary prevention of this scourge.

**Table 7.** Category “The game” (evidence)

| Nº | EVIDENCE   |
|----|--|
| 11 | “Assuming that playful activity is extremely important in children’s lives, in addition to contributing to their development, it may also play a primary role as an instrument for preventing bullying.”                     |
| 1  | “Aiming at the use of games in the prevention of this phenomenon, it is considered that the playful aspects associated with the pedagogical/educational aspects present in the games are important strategies for teaching.” |

#### v. Portuguese Context

According to Araújo and Caldeira (2018), who cite a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), “Portugal has registered more complaints of bullying than the United States.”

In order to combat the increase in cases of cyberbullying, according to Gonçalves and Vaz (2021), the Ministry of Education has implemented a plan that provides for awareness and prevention of bullying and cyberbullying and, at the same time, defines mechanisms for intervention in school. The authors also highlight a set of projects and campaigns aimed at raising awareness and alerting to the problem, such as: *Secure Internet Center* and *SeguraNet*. These authors highlight didactic instruments in the game format that have been designed in this context and are being implemented in Portugal, namely “Playing and Laughing Bullying Let’s Prevent”; quiz4you – Science4you Seguranet; the game PISCA Mega Quiz”

Gonçalves and Vaz (2021) make explicit reference to the activities promoted by the Safe Internet Center, of which they highlight: Formation of teachers; Contest “SeguraNet Challenges”; Content and awareness-raising materials; Awareness-raising sessions in schools; Safer Internet Day campaign; Campaign “Cybersecurity Month in Schools”; Educational resources; Digital Security Seal; Digital Leaders

**Table 8.** Category “Cyberbullying in Portugal” (evidence)

| Nº | EVIDENCE  |
|----|---|
| 3  | “Portugal has seen an increase in the number of victims of bullying and cyberbullying. According to a study by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), published on November 1, 2017, by público, “Portugal has had more complaints of bullying than the United States.”   |
| 1  | “With regard to measures implemented in recent years to reduce the practice of bullying and cyberbullying in Portugal, the Ministry of Education launched, in 2019, a Plan to combat bullying and cyberbullying, focusing on awareness raising, prevention and the definition of intervention mechanisms in the school environment, with the involvement of various services” |

### Conclusion

During the COVID-19 global pandemic period, cyberbullying grew exponentially, not only due to leisure time, but because educational processes also moved primarily online. Furthermore, the social distancing during the pandemic meant that the only contact the students and adolescents made was made in the virtual space.

Analysing the situations in the new context of the current COVID-19 crisis and the accelerated transformation of education and training systems, the problem of cyberbullying could take dimensions for which the school and society itself must be prepared.

In the first theme, **(i) the aggravating factor of cyberbullying**, the authors assume that cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying due to its specific characteristics and that these can even serve as aggravating factors. For the aggressor there is a sense of impunity and invisibility, feeling that he/she can pass all barriers and boundaries without having to deal with the consequences of his/her acts. Also not being physically present, being only something to which he/she watches through a screen, allows the aggressor to feel less remorse and empathy for the suffering of the victim. The virtual world in which stimuli and reactions are immediate, with an incessant search for new pleasures and new amusements that occur at an increasing speed, leads the aggressor to view his/her acts only as a moment of fun and there is no reflection on the consequences. From the victim’s perspective, cyberbullying also has aggravating characteristics. The replicability of the contents in the virtual context makes the aggression be experienced over and over again and scale, for a limitless number of people, the audience that watches the humiliation. The fact that this is not limited to a space and time, unlike the traditional bullying that occurs in a given space, in cyberbullying there are no safe places or rest times because, with mobile devices and the internet, the pressure on the victim is permanent.

In the theme **(ii) teacher education**, it is stated that teachers recognize the importance of the theme, since bullying and cyberbullying are growing and worrying problems in Portuguese schools. The authors draw attention to the need for training, both at the initial level and of continuing education. Education professionals should be holders of knowledge that allows them to act and intervene in a timely manner, thus avoiding the most serious situations and the most harmful consequences for victims and also have knowledge that enable them to identify behaviours, both of the aggressor and of the victim, so that one can act and reduce cases of bullying and cyberbullying in school context.

The third theme refers to **(iii) intervention programs**. The relevance of projects that alert to the theme of cyberbullying and that aim to minimize its effects are emphasised, and it is necessary that the community is inserted in these projects of awareness and development of a digital citizenship, so that everyone can see it as a common task and not as something extrinsic and limited to a context. To this end, students, teachers, and family should acquire knowledge that allows them to know, understand, and avoid cases of bullying and cyberbullying. Being actors in these types of projects will enable young people to develop social interaction skills that will prevent cases of aggression and, in the case of teachers and parents, develop skills that will enable them to recognize and intervene in cases of bullying and cyberbullying in a timely manner.

In summary, with regard to **the theme (iv) the game**, it is considered that the use of play in an educational context enables the development of critical thinking, cooperative work and problem solving, promoting the development of competencies that allow a healthy relationship with others, so that the game should be a resource in the fight against cyberbullying.

In summary, in the fifth **theme (v) Portuguese context is addressed** the plan designed by the Ministry of Education that aims at raising awareness and prevention of cyberbullying and defining action plans to be taken by schools. The work that is being carried out by the Safe Internet Center stands out, namely activities aimed at raising the awareness of young people (games, workshops, awareness-raising sessions, etc.), teacher training and campaigns aimed at the entire educational community.

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Gileta KIERIENĖ

## Introduction

Today's life seems hard to imagine without the Internet and the activities on it, and children make up an estimated one in three Internet users worldwide (Livingstone et al., 2012). Children who have access to digital technology may be better able to learn and prepare for life in an increasingly digital society. They may have access to information on issues that are significant to young people in terms of health, education, or other areas. However, children's access to the Internet may also increase risks that, if not controlled, could jeopardize their wellbeing. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child outlines children's rights, which are increasingly realized through engagement with technologies. The adoption of digital technology is a significant force for change and contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Livingstone, 2014).

However, the Internet today is also becoming a space where various humiliating behaviours take place; it can amplify vulnerabilities and introduce new threats such as problematic social media use and cyberbullying. Thus, with the Internet and technology occupying such a large part of everyday life, bullying among children is changing context and moving from physical school spaces to virtual spaces, from bullying to cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is defined as a behaviour intentionally harming an individual by using electronic means. It can take place anytime and anywhere, can give the bully a degree of anonymity online, and is able to reach a large audience. Due to these unique features, cyberbullying may potentially be even more harmful than traditional bullying (Bonnano et al., 2013).

Being a victim of both types of bullying is associated with an increased risk of depression and suicidal behaviour, while cyberbullying victims are at a higher risk than traditional bullying victims (Schneider et al. 2012). By increasing the risk of depression and suicidality, cyberbullying has a significant impact on adolescents' mental health (Nixon, 2014). When comparing individuals that aren't exposed to any type of bullying with those that are, the bullying victims, and even the bullies themselves, are at a higher risk of suicidal ideation and attempts (Shireen et al., 2014).

Lithuanian experts working with youth agreed that the bullying issue in Lithuania is complex. Since 1994, Lithuania has been listed among the top 5 countries with the highest bullying rates in a report from World Health Organization (WHO). That is still the case in the latest report of 2020: as the latest

cross-national survey of school students - Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC survey) shows, Lithuania is among the leaders in Europe in terms of bullying among children and adolescents, with 32 percent of boys and 31 percent of girls saying they experienced bullying, while 25 percent of boys and 19 percent of girls experienced cyberbullying. All age groups included, the top of the list also includes Latvia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Russia, and England (Inchley et al. 2020).

Also, bullying behaviour seen in the public and political spheres rubs off on teachers' and children's behaviour in schools. But a slight decrease in bullying cases is seen in the most recent WHO report (Inchley et al. 2020). A decrease that could be even bigger since the awareness towards bullying behaviour is growing, according to social health specialist Kastytis Šmigelskas, responsible for the WHO report in Lithuania. More awareness of what bullying behaviour is can result in more cases since students better recognize it.

The decrease in bullying cases in Lithuania was also revealed by two recent studies: the first carried out by Child Line Lithuania, the other conducted by Telia Company.

A survey of teachers conducted by Child Line Lithuania showed that during online classes in 2020, teachers were less likely to notice humiliating behaviour than during school lessons and received fewer requests for help from their students due to bullying situations. Naturally, by not being able to meet each other, children were indeed less likely to experience bullying in physical space. Unfortunately, we do not have available data on how many children experienced cyberbullying during online classes. On the other hand, it is likely that for students, it may be even more difficult to seek help during online classes because teachers are not directly accessible, so children need to find the right channel for them to seek help.

A study conducted by Lithuanian scientists during the pandemic revealed that during the quarantine, the youngest students (primary school) and the students with special educational needs were the most affected by cyberbullying. The relationship between cyberbullying and children's learning outcomes, motivation, relationships with parents and classmates was highlighted. The problem of the relationship between children and teachers has worsened—bullying of teachers, and deliberate disruption of lessons became more frequent. The study also revealed that the cases of cyberbullying during the quarantine could be more related to teasing and a lack of digital etiquette. Both students and their teachers could be targeted as victims of cyberbullying. The aim was often to disrupt the course of the lesson, not to bully a teacher, although in most cases, the teachers' reactions were sensitive (Jusiene et al. 2021).

Bullying remains a significant risk indicator associated with suicide attempt in both males and females. In a study conducted by Campisi et al. in 2020 among adolescents from Israel, Lithuania, and Luxembourg who experienced cyberbullying and school bullying, it was found that cyberbullying had a significantly higher risk associated with suicidal ideations, plans, and attempts. The

study showed that bullying perpetration and victimization via traditional (face-to-face) bullying or cyberbullying were associated with deliberate self-harm in adolescents. (Campisi et al., 2020)

### **The Current Situation of Cyberbullying in Lithuania: Previous Studies and Statistical data**

Since 1994, Lithuania has been listed among the top 5 countries with the highest bullying rates in a report from the World Health Organization (WHO). International HBSC research pointed, in 2018, that bullying is a serious problem for Lithuanian children (Inchley et al. 2020).

Much research was conducted on Lithuanian students and parents. Research conducted in several countries showed a high risk for adolescents from Israel, Lithuania, and Luxembourg who experienced cyberbullying and school bullying, and a significantly higher risk associated with suicidal ideations, plans, and attempts.

Mozūraitytė & Žemaitaitytė identified that except for the satisfaction expressed by boys and girls regarding internet use, girls reported more frequently than boys having daily communication with close friends and constantly thinking about social networks. Also, girls were found to feel more often dissatisfied with the time spent on social networks. Another important result of the research identified that girls are more sensitive to the access restrictions of social networks. Furthermore, almost one-third of the girls and one-fifth of the boys expressed deterioration in their emotional state when it comes to the limitation of social platforms. Also, female subjects reported having more conflicts over social networks.

In their study among Lithuanian adolescents, Gustainiene and Valiune identified, in 2015, that adolescents who had encountered cyberbullying declared that it was wrong to report the incident to adults and that cyberbullying is normal behaviour on the internet and nobody can stop it. The authors also showed that victims usually shared information about the incidents with their friends or with no one at all and identified that girls who reported cyberbullying incidents within the last two months had lower scores on help-seeking attitudes.

Another study conducted by Austys et al. (2022) in Lithuania showed that three quarters of the parents thought that personal smartphones might be harmful to children's health, and the majority of them (99.5%) sustained that they used at least one control measure in order to control and protect their children. A large majority of them (between 85% and 98%) declared that they were sure that children did not receive offending messages or messages from strangers. More than a quarter of the parents included in the research helped their children register on social networks. The study also highlighted that parents with a lower level of education and those with younger children obtained lower scores for the scale measuring the awareness of threats. Moreover, the fathers with a higher education level, single, and unemployed parents indicated that they were linked to lower

parental control on devices. Even though the study found that parents monitor their children’s smartphone usage, the vast majority of them underestimated the high risk of cyberbullying.

The statistical data revealed that the highest level of bullying among Lithuanian students is among 13-year-olds. More than 32% of the boys and 31% of the girls sustained that they experienced bullying. For younger students, under 11 years old, lower rates were registered compared to the adolescents: 29% of the boys and 26% of the girls reported bullying events.

**Figure 8.16** Students who were bullied at least once this school term\* (%)

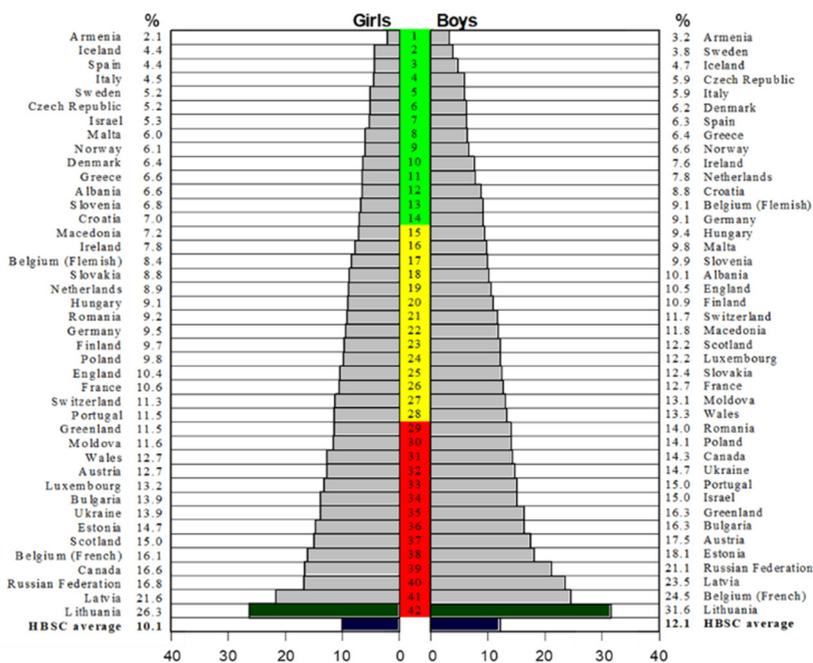


\* Spain did not include this item  
 \*\* France, Germany and Russia are represented only by regions: see Chapter 1 for details

**Fig 1.** WHO reports on cyberbullying rates in European countries

Lithuania leads in terms of bullies in the 11-year-old group. Almost a quarter (24%) of boys and 17% of girls aged 13 said they had taken part in bullying. In the 15-year-old group, they made up 30 and 15%, respectively, and 20 and 11% in the 11-year-old group.

## Cyberbullying among Lithuanian Adolescents



**Fig 2.** Cyberbullying – comparative rates girls/boys

In 2020, Telia Company asked 7,000 students aged 10-18 in Norway, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, as well as Swedish students aged 16 to 18, about their experiences of studying from home. Despite challenges and substantial changes in habits that happened overnight, their overall experience has been largely positive:

- more than half of the children were satisfied with the overall experience of studying from home, and only 15% were dissatisfied;
- most children felt safer (67%), happier (52%), and more relaxed (46%) because of studying from home. 45% agreed that their ability to solve school tasks independently has increased.
- 37% stated that learning and results, as well as the ability to finish tasks on time improved (31%);
- three out of four children found that the way of learning had changed, while six out of ten children learnt new communication tools and new study methods;
- almost all stated that they had access to a computer. The internet worked well for the majority of the children. However, the overall experience in digital learning was significantly lower among the 10% of the children with poor internet connection quality.

In open responses, children noted that they would like to continue digital learning in the future, either integrated with regular classroom learning, when they are ill or as part of lifelong learning.

Children stated that there had been less bullying. However, going to school was described as more inspiring than studying from home – 36% stated that the latter tends to get boring, and 29% described the new situation as tiring. While the hours of sleep and screen time increased, exercise and sports decreased for around half of the children during the period.

When it comes to online safety, around one in ten stated that they had been contacted by an unknown adult while studying from home; the share was larger in the Nordics than in the Baltics. The most common safety issue during the period of digital learning was phishing attempts, followed by accidentally seeing material online, or receiving material that made the child uncomfortable.

### **The Main Issues among Students and Teachers in the New Digital Era**

Lithuania, like the majority of other countries, faced similar educational challenges, including, among other things:

- not equal access to education and computers/internet,
- teachers' and school administration's readiness for digital teaching,
- the physical and mental health of students, their parents, teachers, their emotional, social well-being,
- social and digital exclusion,
- cyberbullying.

Looking at global trends in cyberbullying in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a growing body of research and publications claiming that bullying reports have increased by nearly 80% since the pandemic began, particularly among vulnerable communities such as people of different racial backgrounds, LGBTQ people, children, and young adults (Parker, 2020).

It should be noted, however, that despite some specific cases, studies have dominated, the results of which show that cyberbullying numbers have nevertheless decreased. For example, the social platform Instagram shows a significant decrease in the number of bullying cases before and during quarantine (63% vs. 57%). There is no clear answer as to why this happened, but it may be related to the fact that the Instagram platform is often used as a representative channel of self-comparison with others. As the global quarantine has changed the rules, no one could share spectacular views from their vacations, luxury restaurants etc., and the opportunities for all users have levelled off a bit.

In accordance with the already mentioned Telia Company survey data on online learning, almost one-third of the surveyed students reported a decreased level of bullying, two-thirds did not notice any significant change in this regard, and 7 percent thought the level of bullying had increased. When asked to identify

the channels through which they experienced or witnessed bullying, children most often marked closed chat groups (35%), virtual classes, and social networks, both in private correspondence and in public posts (24% each).

A study (Jusiene et al. 2021) conducted by Lithuanian scientists during the pandemic also revealed that during the quarantine:

- the youngest students and the students with special educational needs were the most affected by cyberbullying,
- the relationship between children and teachers has worsened,
- bullying of teachers, disruption of lessons became more frequent.

### **Lithuanian National Legislation**

Article 22 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania protects everyone from arbitrary or unlawful interference with their personal and family lives, from encroachment on his or her honour and dignity.

Pursuant to Article 22 of the Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania (Book II), a photograph (part thereof), portrait or other image of a person may be reproduced, sold, shown, printed, and the person may be photographed only with his or her consent.

Lithuanian national legislation stipulates that no one should bully and be bullied:

- according to art. 10 of the law on fundamentals of protection of the rights of the child, all forms of violence against children are prohibited (<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalact/lt/tad/tais.26397>).
- pursuant to article 4 of the law of the republic of Lithuania on the protection of minors from the negative impact of public information, the information that has a negative impact on minors includes information that promotes humiliating behaviour, which is used for bullying against a person or group of people on the grounds of nationality, race, sex, origin, disability, sexual orientation, social status, language, religion, belief, opinion or other similar grounds. Article 6 prohibits the dissemination of information relating to personal data, whereby, in providing data about a minor, his dignity is degraded and (or) his interests are violated (<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalact/lt/tad/tais.183129/ibgwcvrrop>).
- according to Article 6 of the Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania, anyone who has become aware of a public case of bullying in cyberspace has the right to or must submit a report on the website [www.draugiskasinternetas.lt](http://www.draugiskasinternetas.lt) (<https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/17d94ea2976411e68adcda1bb2f432d1>).

In Lithuania, all schools are obliged to implement programmes focusing on bullying prevention and developing social-emotional skills. In 2016, The Seimas (Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania adopted the amendments to the Law on Education (No. XII-2685), in which:

- the concepts of bullying, cyberbullying, and prevention program are defined,
- established prohibition of any form of violence: students against students; employees of educational institutions against students; students against employees of educational institutions; employees of educational institutions against other employees of that institution; parents (guardians, caregivers) of students against students; teachers,
- planned the provision of psychological assistance to students and teachers who have experienced or used violence,
- defined the responsibilities and actions of the school administration in cases of violence (notification, provision of psychological assistance),
- it is planned to improve the qualification of pedagogical staff at least every 4 years in the field of development of students' social emotional competencies,
- established an obligation to ensure the participation of each student in the prevention program,
- there is an obligation for schools to prevent violence and bullying in accordance with the recommendations approved by the minister of education and science.

### **Support Strategies Developed in Lithuanian Education Sector**

Support strategies at the formal level of the education sector in Lithuania are prepared by the National Agency for Education, NAE, founded by the Ministry of Education, Sport, and Science of the Republic of Lithuania.

The mission of the Agency is to take part in the implementation of the State pre-school, pre-primary, and general education policies, induce education institutions (except for higher education institutions) and other education providers to ensure quality of education by providing informational, counselling, qualification improvement, and self-education environment building assistance, conducting education monitoring and education research, developing the education content, and coordinating its implementation. On the Agency's remote learning website, they provide current information that is useful in the process of online learning. Here are some of the available strategies:

- *Recommendations for parents and guardians on child safety on the Internet,*
- *Recommendations for teachers on Internet safety during distance learning,* prepared by the Experts of the Internet hotline svarusinternetas.lt (EN: Clean Internet) of the Communications Regulatory Authority of the Republic of Lithuania,
- *Three Steps on Organizing Distance Learning* – a memorandum prepared by the State Data Protection Inspectorate in order to help educational institutions to ensure adequate protection of personal data by organizing

distance learning. The memorandum presents 3 steps that can support the process of organizing and implementing distance learning,

- *Recommendations for the prevention of violence and bullying through distance learning* for school leaders and educators prepared by the specialists of the Agency's Psychology Department.

## **Best Practices**

*Campaign Be patyčių (EN: Without Bullying)*

<https://www.bepatyciu.lt/>

The campaign was initiated in 2004 by *Vaikų Linija* (Child Line) with the main goal of preventing violence and bullying. It aims to create a safer environment not only in educational institutions but also in the lives of adults, to draw attention to the importance of this problem and educate the public.

Main objectives of the campaign:

- to carry out educational activities aimed at school staff, pupils, and their parents,
- to inform the public about initiatives in Lithuania and abroad, with the help of which the problem of bullying can be effectively solved,
- together with partners to change the prevailing attitudes of bullying in the society and to form attitudes unfavourable to bullying.

The campaign has a separate initiative against cyberbullying. Its website section has information for parents, schools, and children with the most important information and flyers on what cyberbullying is, how to recognize it, and what steps to take when experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying.

The campaign organizes bullying-awareness months each year, online and face-to-face training sessions for parents, children, and educators. These events are shared on the campaign's Facebook page. The campaign's website contains numerous self-study materials.

The organizers of the campaign have held numerous online and in-person workshops to help children and all those involved in possible bullying and cyberbullying incidents to recognize and act in these situations.

*Vaikų linija (EN: Child Line)*

<https://www.vaikulinija.lt/en/>

Child Line was established in 1997 and provides free and anonymous help to the children and teenagers by phone and online.

Child Line consultants listen to all the children's stories and try to find ways together to solve their difficulties, to encourage them to share their worries with the people they trust. If necessary, children are referred to other institutions.

Currently more than 350 volunteering counsellors provide emotional support to children and teenagers.

The consultants and volunteers in the organization have helped thousands of children and teenagers by providing them with a safe space, listening to their problems, and finding the answers together.

The organization also participates and coordinates various campaigns, projects, and other initiatives to help stop all kinds of bullying.

*Safer Internet*

<https://www.draugiskasinternetas.lt/en/about-safer-internet/>

Safer Internet Centre Lithuania: draugiskasinternetas.lt is a recent action under the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF Telecom) programme whilst implementing the Safer Internet Centre's (SIC) generic services.

For the past 10 years, Lithuania has implemented the EC Safer Internet programme that was started in Lithuania in 2005. Since July 2012, Safer Internet consortium in Lithuania has increased its activities and there are four officially involved partners: National Agency for Education (Agency) as coordinator, Communications Regulatory Authority of the Republic of Lithuania (RRT), Vaikų linija (Child Line); association Langas į ateitį (LIA).

The overall objective is to deploy services that help make the Internet a trusted environment for children through actions that empower and protect them online.

Nationally, the SIC has a mature and well-established, multi-stakeholder network, involving the public sector, private sector, and civil society, therefore with the capacity to deploy services that help make the Internet a trusted environment for children (and citizens at large) through actions that empower and protect them online.

*Jaunimo linija (EN: Youth Line)*

<https://jaunimolinija.lt/en/>

*Jaunimo linija* (Youth Line) is one of the largest charities providing free emotional support by telephone and internet in Lithuania. It has been operating since 1991 and anyone who is in emotional distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide can contact the charity 24/7, 365 days per year. *Jaunimo linija* volunteers are here to hear everyone out via free telephone line, email, or online chat.

*Jaunimo linija* is a non-governmental, non-profit organization operating based on the support of private donors, businesses, and the state.

The charity has been offering support for the last 29 years, with over 300 volunteers in 3 branches. At least 80 per cent of young people (16–30-year-olds) believe that *Jaunimo linija* can help them when facing emotional difficulties. Nowadays, the organization answers 67 percent of telephone calls and internet

messages. According to 2020 data, experts evaluate 73 percent of calls as successful, and 70 percent of those who contact the helpline feel better after a conversation. 85 percent of the volunteers evaluate their performance and experience in the organization positively.

*Patyčių dėžutė (EN: Report Bullying Box)*  
<https://patyciudezute.licejus.lt/en>

*Patyčių dėžutė* is designed to help you quickly and completely anonymously report any acts of bullying that you experience or notice. You can provide information not only about yourself, but also about your classmates, friends, teachers, or any other member of your school community who suffers from bullying or is a bully.

Complete the report with details of the person who has been bullied and details of the bully, witnesses, the date, place, and time of the incident. You can also attach a screenshot of the cyberbullying to the report.

The report will reach those who are responsible for solving bullying cases at your school. All the information is confidential, and you can be assured that it will not be publicly distributed or used for any other purposes.

Schools have reported several cases of prevented suicides that were intended by children and reported.

*Olweus software in Lithuanian schools*  
<https://www.nsa.smm.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Olweus-programos-vykdymas-Lietuvoje.pdf>

*Olweus* is a bullying and cyberbullying prevention program that has been used in Lithuania since 2008.

It is a comprehensive approach that includes schoolwide, classroom, individual, and community components.

The program is focused on long-term change that creates a safe and positive school climate. It is designed and evaluated for use in elementary, middle, junior high and high schools (K-12).

The program's goals are:

- to reduce and prevent bullying problems among school children,
- to improve peer relations at school.

Since *Olweus* has been used in schools, many teachers and other school staff say that about 50% of bullying cases have been stopped.

The program has also been proven successful in the virtual classroom, when studying online.

*Sąmoningumo didinimo mėnuo BE PATYČIŲ* (EN: *Bullying Awareness Month*)  
<https://www.bepatyciu.lt/samoningumo-didinimo-menuo-be-patyciu-2021/apie-iniciatyva/>

What used to be *Veiksmo savaitė be patyčių* (EN: Action Week without Bullying), now is known as Bullying Awareness Month.

Every March, *Vaikų linija* invites educational institutions, active non-governmental, state, and business organizations to contribute to this initiative with their activities and ideas, as well as to organize and carry out activities for their communities to stop bullying and other degrading behaviour.

The campaign creates its dissemination materials for printing and digital banners to include on websites. It organizes competitions, creates short, animated films to be shown in schools. It also holds a conference to bring awareness to bullying and cyberbullying.

*REAGUOK.LT* - a continuous distance self-learning course for educators on bullying prevention and intervention at school

In the program created by Create Lithuania project managers anyone can take the course for free and receive a completion certificate:

- The training is divided into 18 topics
- It covers the main areas of bullying theory
- Each topic lasts about 30 minutes
- Each topic is complemented by innovative visuals, games, tests, a questionnaire, and additional literature that make it easier and more interesting to absorb the information and provide the learner with valuable experience and useful knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, cyberbullying has very damaging consequences for individuals. It disrupts school life, has great emotional damage, and may have fatal consequences. Although technology has brought new opportunities for students and teenagers, it is important that everyone learn to use it responsibly.

Although the numbers and facts about cyberbullying listed above are alarming, there is a positive aspect to the growing issue of cyberbullying. Global awareness of the issue is growing, governments from all over the world are working to curb and prevent cyberbullying, and numerous social media sites are doing their part as well. Attempts to stop cyberbullying among schoolchildren must be consistent, long-term, and inclusive of the entire school community. From the viewpoint of the students, the most successful strategies to stop cyberbullying should be focused on psychological conditioning so as to boost students' self-esteem and lay out the repercussions for participating in cyberbullying. As a final

point, it is critical to educate adolescents on what cyberbullying is, how it affects others, and how to stop it. Education remains the only effective solution.

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# VICTIMS AND AGGRESSORS IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS - A STUDY ON CYBERBULLYING AMONG STUDENTS IN SIX COUNTRIES

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**Magdalena IORGA**

## **Introduction**

There are a lot of studies from a substantial body of research on bullying behaviours that explain the negative effect of this aggressive, repetitive, and intentional act on the victim's psycho-emotional and social well-being. The aggression involved in bullying can be verbal, physical, sexual, psychological, or relational (Ortega and Mora-Merchán 2008). But there is not as much research on the relatively new form of bullying— the online one, named cyberbullying, which can be roughly defined as the use of digital media to deliberately harm a victim. Cyberbullying is characterized by sending aggressive messages or humiliating images; making intimidating telephone calls; impersonating the victim's identity; recording and then sharing videos in which the victim is humiliated, ridiculed, or attacked; spreading false information about the victim; or creating fake social media accounts in the name of the victim. There are also many online platforms on which bullying may take place, including e-mails, blogs, social networking websites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter), or online games. (Stoilova et al., 2021)

Different studies were conducted among adolescents in order to prevent online aggression and deal with the negative impact on psychological life. Many of them identified that older students are more prone to experiencing cyberbullying than younger students. Some others showed that girls are more prone to experiencing aggressive behaviour in an online environment compared to boys. On the one hand, apart from gender, age, and grade, a lot of factors were also highlighted as being related to victimization and aggression: personality traits, relationship with parents, loneliness, self-confidence, autonomy, parental style, relationship with peers, chronic condition (psychological or physical), socio-economic status, and social-related aspects. (Fabris et al., 2022). On the other hand, factors related to school were also found to determine cyberbullying aggression and victimization among students: school code, school climate, or the perceived severity among teachers. (Görzig & Ólafsson, 2013).

Both the use of psychological control and the lack of supervision by parents are risk factors that increase the likelihood of children bullying their peers or being victimized by them. Research in the field has identified that the type of relationship with parents and parental control are important variables. (Gómez-Ortiz et al.,

2015; Calvete et al., 2010). In general, children who trust their parents and have good communication with them, as well as those that grow up in a positive, warm, loving environment in which the child's autonomy is encouraged, are less likely to get involved in bullying and cyberbullying because they were encouraged to solve their own problems, to deal with conflicts, and to look for supportive adults (at home or in school).

Many of the studies focused on obvious vulnerabilities (being poor, having only one parent, having a chronic disease), but some of the research pointed out the presence of victimization even among popular students or those with very good academic results. The studies showed that the impact is strong and negative for their well-being because these kinds of victims never disclose incidents and never look for help, especially because they are well-rated and do not want to be seen as vulnerable. (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

In general, the scientific literature focused on victims and aggressors and the vicious cycle of victim-becoming-aggressor. Few studies have identified psychological distress among bystanders. As the researchers have shown, bystanders themselves are affected by aggressive incidents, and many of them experience cognitive dissonance (what they want to do and what they really do/do not). Also, empathy seemed to be a good predictor of interventions in cases of cyberbullying, but only the cognitive kind, as some studies showed. Affective empathy and cognitive empathy were independent predictors of defence. Barlisnka and colleagues found that cognitive empathy activated prosocial cyber-bystanding behaviours, while affective empathy showed no effect.

Another factor related to cyberaggression is the time spent on the internet and the use of social networks (SNs). Recent studies indicated that social media use among 13- to 17-year-olds is around 93–97%, girls using SNs for socializing and boys more for video games. (de Felice et al., 2022). Maybe one of the explanations for girls being more often victims of cyberbullying is related to the fact that SNs are more often used for socializing, networking, body image, and disclosing themselves - facts that make girls more prone to becoming victims. (Best et al., 2014; McCrae et al., 2017; James et al., 2017).

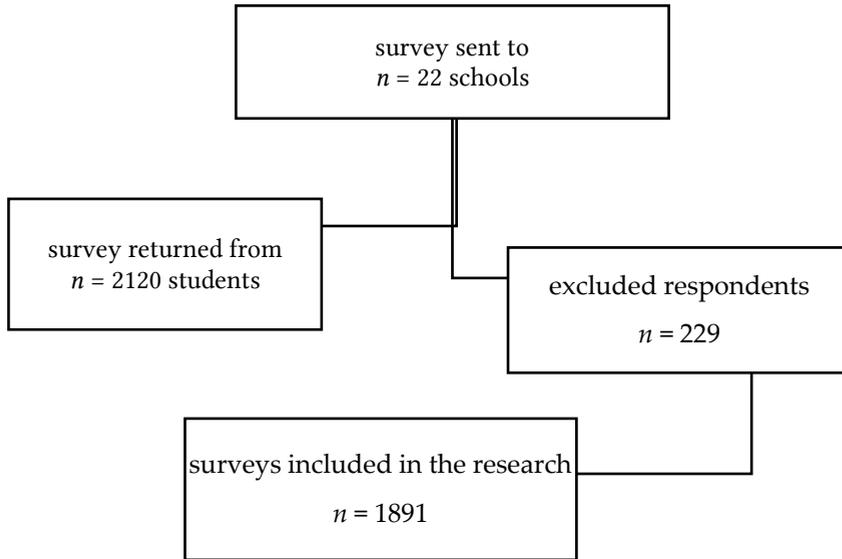
## **Materials and Methods**

### *Study Population*

The questionnaire was distributed online among 22 schools from rural and urban areas. Target participants were primary, secondary, and high school students between the ages of 10 and 19. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of the data, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study whenever they wanted, without consequences. No incentive was given to participants.

The inclusion criteria were questionnaires filled in by children enrolled in private or public schools, aged 10 to 19 who submitted fully filled-in questionnaires.

The criteria for excluding questionnaires from the research were questionnaires not fully completed and questionnaires submitted after the deadline. A number of 1891 questionnaires were finally included in the research. *Figure 1* provides details on the response rate.



**Figure 1.** Study profile.

*Data collection*

The questionnaire was constructed using the Google Forms application (Alphabet, Mountain View, CA, USA), was translated from English into all six national languages, and was developed in order to address the prevention, recognition, and intervention of online harassment against its cruel social, psychological-medical, and educational impacts for children and teens.

- a) The first part of the questionnaire gathered socio-demographic information (like age, gender, level of education of children and their parents, home environment, school environment, and members of the household).

Data about family income was measured using *the Family Affluence Scale* (FAS), which was developed first in Scotland as a measure of family affluence. It was proven that at a young age, children did not have accurate information on their family’s finances, and adolescents too were not informed about family incomes. So, this evaluation was found to be a less intrusive and more comprehensible approach that had to be applied in order to evaluate the socio-economic status among children and teenagers. (Currie et al., 1997). The Family Affluence Scale (FAS), a four-item measure of family wealth, was developed in the

WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study as an alternative measure, and in 2001–2002, the scale was composed of four items:

1. Does your family own a car, van, or truck? (No [0]; Yes, one [1]; Yes, two or more),
  2. Do you have your own bedroom for yourself? (No [0]; Yes [1]),
  3. During the past 12 months, how many times did you travel away on holiday with your family? (Not at all [0]; Once [1]; Twice [2]; More than twice [3]),
  4. How many computers does your family own? (None [0]; One [1]; Two [2]; More than two [3]).
- b) The second part includes questions about children's satisfaction with their relationships with parents, classmates, colleagues from school, friends, and teachers. Self-assessed items were constructed, and responses were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale. Other questions in this section include items about grades obtained last year, as well as the relationship between mother and father from the children's perspective, children's relationships with parents, the main decision-maker in the family, a self-assessment of social position (leader, popular, or lonely person), positioning the school learning situation compared to classmates, the number of best friends, and the number of children in the class.
- c) The third part targeted bullying and cyberbullying behaviours, including items that referred to children's views on the gender of people who are most often abusers or abuse others (boys or girls), if they had ever been online abusers or victims of physical or online bullying, if they had colleagues who terrorized others, if they had seen colleagues who were terrorized physically or online, and if they reported the incident in those cases.
- d) The fourth part of the survey collected information about the use of mobile phones and the internet, the main reason for using the internet, the average time spent on a typical working day and on a weekend day on the internet, the age at which children received their first phone call, how often they socialize with people they know on the internet, as well as their parents' behaviour towards them regarding excessive phone use (blaming, insulting, and restricting access).
- e) The final part of the questionnaire addressed several standardized scales used to assess self-esteem, and loneliness, as presented above:
- *Rosenberg self-esteem scale* consists of 10 items, and it is a self-report instrument for evaluating individual self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). RSES is scored using four response choices, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
  - *UCLA Loneliness scale* (ULS-8) contains the 20 items selected from the third revised version UCLA Loneliness Scale by Russell et al., 1980. This

instrument is scored on a 4-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always). The UCLA is a commonly used tool developed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation.

- *The Cyber-aggression Scale (CYB-AGS)* comprises 18 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). These items measure the adolescent's experience as a cyberbullying perpetrator (directly or indirectly) in the past 12 months (Buelga & Pons, 2012).
- *The Cyber victimization Questionnaire (CYVIC)* is a self-report instrument composed of 19 items, each of which presents aggression suffered through a mobile phone or the Internet. The students should mark the frequency with which they were the victim of each of these situations in the past three months, on a 4-point Likert-type scale (Álvarez-García et al., 2017).
- *The Parenting Styles and Dimensions questionnaire (PSDQ)* with 40 items is designed to measure parenting styles, grouping them into six typologies of supportive, controlling, compassionate, aggressive, avoidant, and orthodox parents (Batool, 2016).

### *Statistical analysis*

All analyses for this research were performed using the IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics for Windows, version 24 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The results for descriptive statistics were expressed as means and standard deviations (SD).

The normality of the data distribution was tested by using the Kolmogorov-Smirnoff test. Given the fact that all data were not normally distributed, the bivariate analysis was performed, and non-parametric tests were applied.

To assess comparative results considering gender, living environment, and school environment, the Mann-Whitney test was performed. Also, comparative results considering family affluence and country were assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis H test to determine if there were statistically significant differences between more than two groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable.

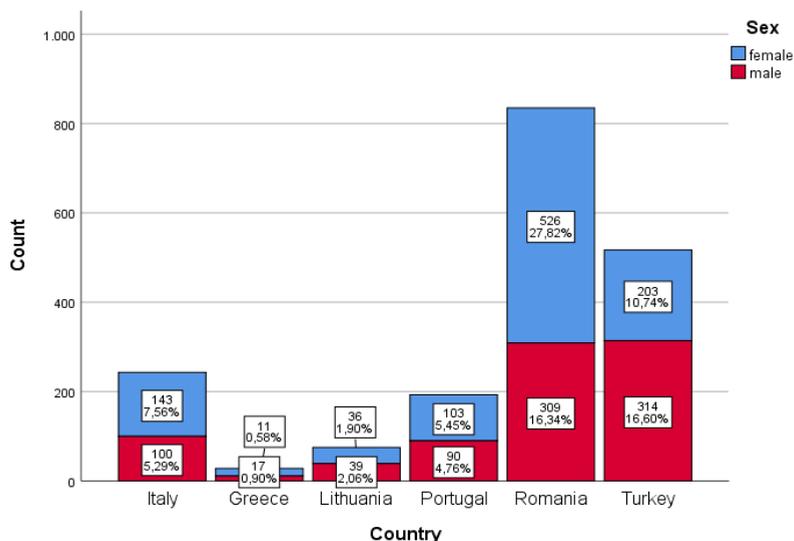
The Spearman correlation was used to test the relationship between variables. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

## **Results**

### *Socio-demographic data, family characteristics, and financial status*

Students included in the research were studying in six different countries: Romania (n = 835, 44.2%), (n = 517, 27.3%), Italy (n = 243, 12.9%), Portugal (n = 193, 10.2%), Lithuania (n = 75, 4%), and Greece (n = 28, 1.5%). More female students

participated in the study (54.36 %, N = 1028). The distribution of students according to country and gender is presented in *Figure 2*.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of students considering gender and country

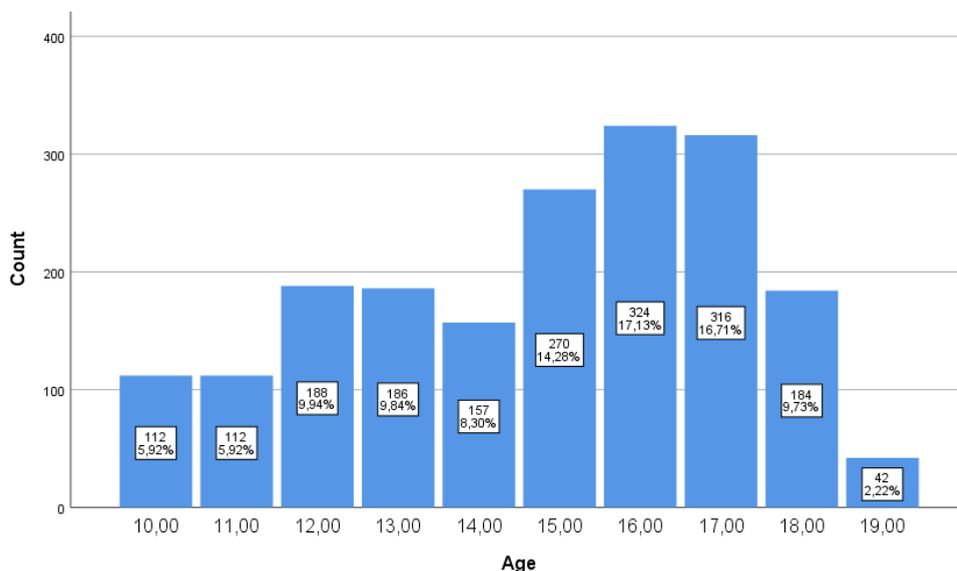
The mean age of the students participating in the study was  $M = 14.77 \pm 2.41$  with a minimum age of 10 and a maximum age of 19 years old. The mean age of the students who participated in the study, depending on the country they come from, is presented in *Table 1*.

**Table 1.** Mean age by country

| Country   | Age (M $\pm$ S.D)    |
|-----------|----------------------|
| Italy     | M = 16.29 $\pm$ 1.28 |
| Greece    | M = 14.60 $\pm$ 1.61 |
| Lithuania | M = 14.56 $\pm$ 1.19 |
| Portugal  | M = 15.48 $\pm$ 2.17 |
| Romania   | M = 15.84 $\pm$ 1.82 |
| Turkey    | M = 12.11 $\pm$ 1.67 |

The majority of them ( $n = 1784$ , 94.3%) declared that their school was in a city. One item asked if the school was in the same area, and the results showed that 57.6% ( $n = 1090$ ) were studying in the same city or village, while an important number of students (42.4%,  $N = 801$ ) sustained that they had to travel daily to a town in order to reach their schools.

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**Figure 3.** The distribution of students considering the age

Students were asked to mention their grades. The grades ranged from 3 (for primary school) to 13 (for post-college or professional schools). The distribution of respondents considering this variable is presented in *Table 2*.

**Table 2.** Socio-demographic data

| Students' grade | M ± S.D and % <sup>1</sup> |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| 3               | 33 (1.7%)                  |
| 4               | 39 (2.1%)                  |
| 5               | 133 (7.0%)                 |
| 6               | 141 (7.5%)                 |
| 7               | 255 (13.5%)                |
| 8               | 154 (8.1%)                 |
| 9               | 218 (11.5%)                |
| 10              | 373 (19.7%)                |
| 11              | 279 (14.8%)                |
| 12              | 235 (12.4%)                |
| 13              | 31 (1.6%)                  |

<sup>1</sup>Means and standard deviations (M±D), frequency and percentages (%)

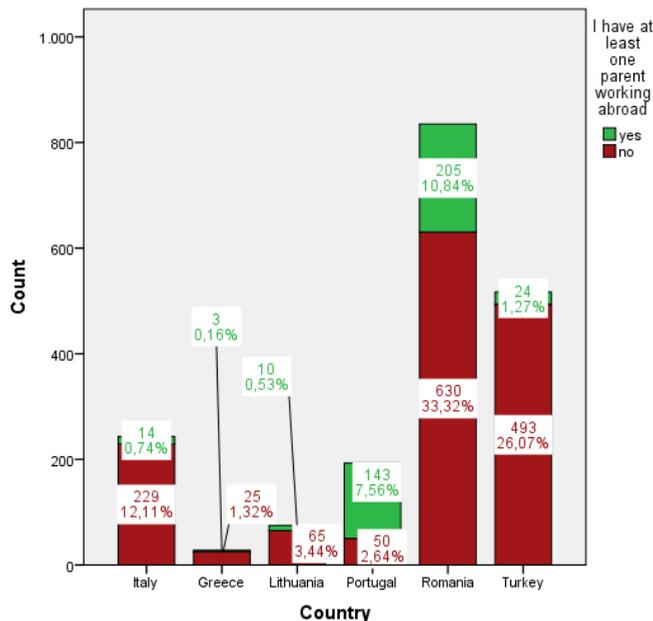
Family wealth was measured using a 4-item scale, the *Family Affluence Scale (FAS)*. A composite FAS score is calculated for each student based on the answers to these four items. Thus, the total scores for all 6 countries varied between 0 points - which indicates low affluence (2%, N = 38) and 9 points (7.2%, N = 137) - which indicates high affluence, the average being  $M = 5.31 \pm 2.26$ . Scores between 3 and 5

points indicate medium affluence (38%, N = 718). Comparative results are presented in *Table 3*.

**Table 3.** Family Affluence Scale results by country

| Family Affluence Scale | M ± S.D         |
|------------------------|-----------------|
| Lithuania              | M = 6.96 ± 1.67 |
| Portugal               | M = 6.77 ± 1.62 |
| Italy                  | M = 5.90 ± 1.86 |
| Romania                | M = 5.30 ± 2.33 |
| Greece                 | M = 4.42 ± 2.11 |
| Turkey                 | M = 4.31 ± 2.10 |

Also, the study gathered family-related data. Adolescents were asked if they had at least one of their parents working abroad. Almost one-fifth of them sustained that they had a parent that worked in another country (n = 399, 21.1%). Fewer students in Greece, Lithuania, Italy, or Turkey said they had parents who worked in other countries, while surprisingly, in Portugal, although the results showed one of the highest averages in terms of family affluence, most students said they had at least one parent working abroad (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Distribution by country

The study also collected data about the number of children in the family. The analysis of the data showed that 17.8% (n = 336) were single children, 48.5% (n = 918) had a brother or a sister, 22.1% (n = 418) had two siblings, and 11.6% sustained that they had more than three brothers or sisters.

In terms of parents' level of education, the analysis of responses revealed that more than one-third of the mothers and fathers graduated from the college level. More details about parents' level of education, type of family, or the number of children in the family are presented in *Table 4*.

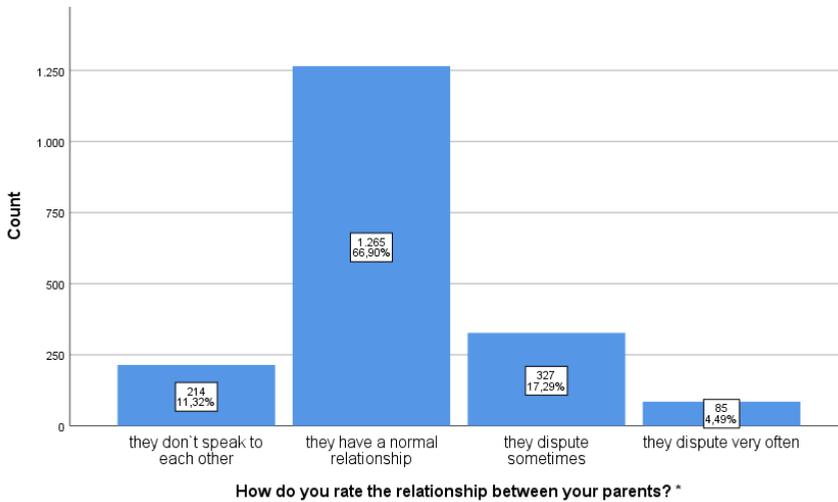
**Table 4.** Family related data

| <b>Variables</b>  | <b>M±S.D and %</b> |
|---|--------------------|
| <b>Level of education of mothers</b>                            |                    |
| Primary school  | 127 (6.7%)         |
| Secondary school  | 259 (13.7%)        |
| High school   | 768 (40.6%)        |
| University  | 601 (31.8%)        |
| I do not know   | 136 (7.2%)         |
| <b>Level of education of fathers</b>                            |                    |
| Primary school  | 94 (5%)            |
| Secondary school  | 263 (13.9%)        |
| High school   | 765 (40.5%)        |
| University  | 588 (31.1%)        |
| I do not know   | 181 (9.6%)         |
| <b>Home environment/Members of the household:<br/>"I live":</b> |                    |
| With both my parents  | 1430 (75.6%)       |
| Only with mom   | 229 (12.1%)        |
| Only with dad   | 40 (2.1%)          |
| Only with grandparents  | 27 (1.4%)          |
| Parents, grandparents, or other relatives                       | 73 (3.9%)          |
| In an institution centre  | 5 (0.3%)           |
| Others  | 87 (4.6%)          |
| <b>"My parents":</b>  |                    |
| live together   | 1546 (81.8%)       |
| live separately   | 345 (18.2%)        |
| <b>The number of children in the family</b>                     | M = 2.31 ± 0.98    |

#### *Relationship with family, friends, and colleagues*

More than half of the students considered that the relationship between their parents was collaborative (N = 1546, 81.8%), conflictual (n = 166, 8.8%) and a small number of them declared that there was no relationship between their parents (N = 179, 9.4%).

The students were also asked how they appreciated the relationship between their parents. The frequency of answers is presented in *Figure 5*.



**Figure 5.** Students' opinions regarding the relationships between parents

Also, more than half of the children declared that there was not a single family member who made decisions, but it was a shared decision among the members of the family (62.8%, N = 1180). Detailed information is presented in *Table 5*.

**Table 5.** Decision in the family

| Who takes the decision in the family?                   | N, %        |
|---|-------------|
| In general, my mother                                   | 407, 21.5%  |
| In general, my father                                   | 261, 13.8%  |
| In general, the grandparents                            | 15, 0.8%    |
| In general, me  | 28, 1.5%    |
| It is a shared decision among the members of the family | 1180, 62.8% |

Regarding the relationship between children and parents, more than half of the students stated that their mothers (58.9%, N = 1114) and fathers (65.9%, N = 1246) did not offend them and never shouted at them. The distribution of answers is presented in *Table 6*.

**Table 6.** Distribution of answers for the item investigating the behaviour of both parents

| Does your mother/father offend you or scream at you? | Mother (n, %)   | Father (n, %)   |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| Never  | 1114, 58.9%     | 1246, 65.9%     |
| Sometimes  | 656, 34.7%      | 535, 28.3%      |
| Frequently   | 46, 2.4%        | 69, 3.6%        |
| All the time   | 75, 4%          | 41, 2.2%        |
|  | M = 1.51 ± 0.73 | M = 1.42 ± 0.66 |

The students were also asked if their mothers or fathers had been verbally aggressive to them. More than half of them sustained that they had never been aggressed by their parents in this way. The means and percentages are presented in *Table 7*.

**Table 7.** Distribution of answers for the item investigating the verbal aggressiveness for both parents

| <i>Is your mother/father verbally aggressive to you?</i> | Mother (n, %)   | Father (n, %)   |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|
| Never  | 1161, 61.4%     | 1234, 65.3%     |
| Occasionally   | 369, 19.5%      | 348, 18.4%      |
| Sometimes  | 290, 15.3%      | 227, 12%        |
| Often  | 56, 3%          | 64, 3.4%        |
| Always   | 15, 0.8%        | 18, 1%          |
|  | M = 1.62 ± 0.90 | M = 1.56 ± 0.89 |

The students were asked to express their satisfaction with their relationships with different categories of people on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = very dissatisfied and 5 = very satisfied. Mainly, the students were very satisfied with their relationships with their parents (M = 4.12 ± 1.07) and friends. More self-rated items are described in *Table 8*.

**Table 8.** Self-rated items regarding satisfaction with relationship with ....

| Item                         | 1             | 2             | 3             | 4             | 5             | M ± SD         |
|------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| your parents                 | 53<br>(2.8)   | 121<br>(6.4)  | 314<br>(16.6) | 447<br>(23.6) | 956<br>(50.6) | 4.12 ±<br>1.07 |
| your friends                 | 32<br>(1.7)   | 88<br>(4.7)   | 233<br>(12.3) | 682<br>(36.1) | 856<br>(45.3) | 4.18 ±<br>0.93 |
| your classmates              | 85<br>(4.5)   | 147<br>(7.8)  | 474<br>(25.1) | 665<br>(35.2) | 520<br>(27.5) | 3.73 ±<br>1.08 |
| other students in the school | 207<br>(10.9) | 875<br>(46.3) | 658<br>(34.8) | 102<br>(5.4)  | 49<br>(2.6)   | 2.42 ±<br>0.85 |
| teachers                     | 64<br>(3.4)   | 160<br>(8.5)  | 478<br>(25.3) | 618<br>(32.7) | 571<br>(30.2) | 3.77 ±<br>1.07 |

#### *Self-positioning of the school learning situation*

The students mentioned that the number of people in the class was M = 27 ± 4.98 and they stated that they had between none (7.5%, N = 142) and more than five best friends (17%, N = 322), with an average of M = 2.46 ± 0.57.

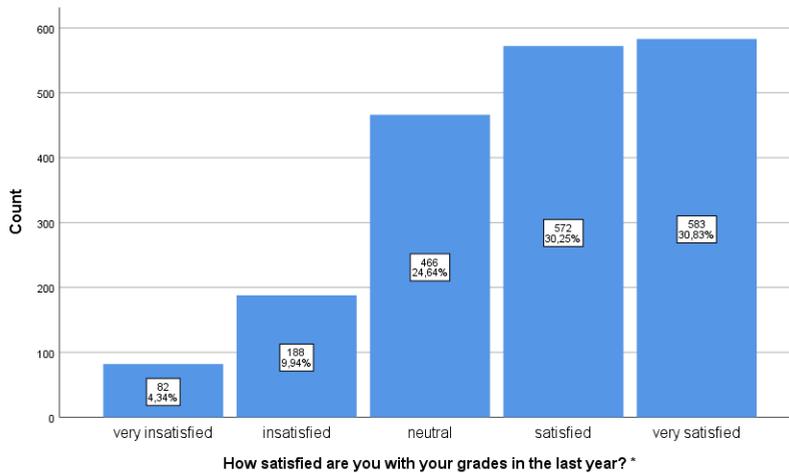
The students were also asked about how they appreciated themselves regarding their social position in the school. The distribution of their answers is presented in *Table 9*.

**Table 9.** Frequency of answers to self-rated items

|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree   | Neutral    | Agree      | Strongly agree |
|--|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|----------------|
| <i>I consider that I am a popular person</i>     | 351, 18.6%        | 424, 22.4% | 778, 41.1% | 2661, 4.1% | 72, 3.8%       |
| <i>I consider that I am a solitary person</i>    | 411, 21.7%        | 374, 19.8% | 546, 28.9% | 436, 23.1% | 124, 6.6%      |
| <i>I consider that I am a leader in my group</i> | 449, 23.7%        | 491, 26%   | 672, 35.5% | 201, 1.6%  | 78, 4.1%       |

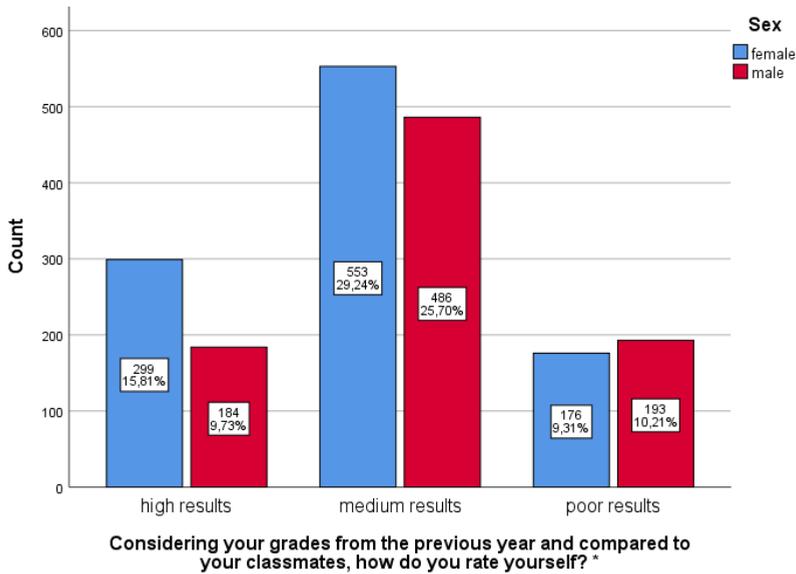
On a Likert-like scale from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), the analysis of the answers showed that students were quite satisfied with the grades obtained at school last year, the average being  $M = 3.73 \pm 1.12$ . The distribution of answers is presented in *Figure 6*.

In addition, more than half of the students reported achieving medium learning results compared to their classmates (54.9%,  $N = 1039$ ).

**Figure 6.** Satisfaction with grades from previous year of study

The answers to the item “Considering your grades from the previous year and compared to your classmates, how do you rate yourself?”, showed that a quarter of the respondents considered that they had high results ( $n = 483$ , 25.5%), more than half of them sustained that they had medium results ( $n = 1039$ , 54.9%), and 19.5% ( $n = 369$ ) evaluated themselves as having poor results. The frequency of their answers, considering gender differences, is presented in *Figure 7*.

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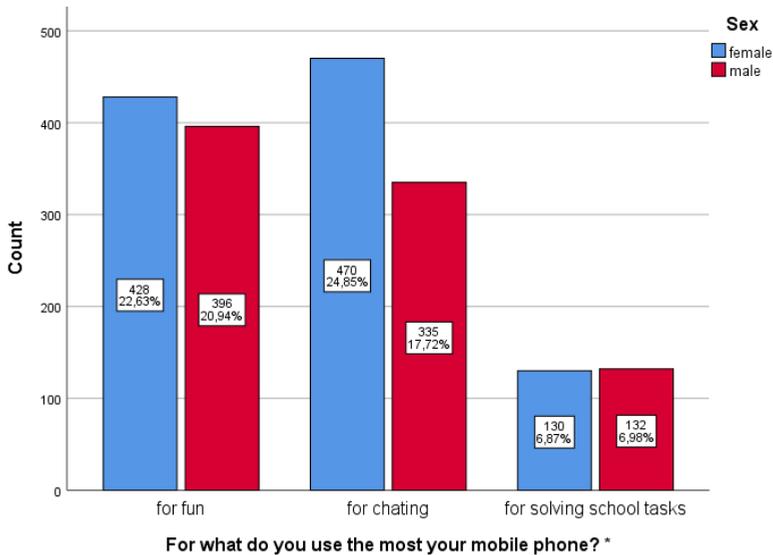
**Figure 7.** Distribution of answers for male and female respondents

### *Use of the internet and mobile phones*

Cyberbullying is about using phones and having access to social networks. Some items targeted the use of smartphones. The results indicate that the average age at which children had their first phone is  $M = 10.19 \pm 2.30$ , with a minimum of 3 and a maximum of 16 years old.

The Mann-Whitney test ( $U = 339096.500$ ,  $Z = -4.253$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed that there were significant differences in this item in terms of the living environment, in the sense that children living in a city ( $Mdn = 10.00$ ) received the first phone at a younger age compared to children living in the villages ( $Mdn = 11$ ).

The main reasons why students used smartphones were primarily for having fun (43.6%,  $N = 824$ ) and chatting (42.6%,  $N = 805$ ), and less so for solving academic tasks (13.9%,  $N = 262$ ). The gender distribution of students according to the main reason for using the internet is presented in *Figure 8*.



**Figure 8.** Distribution of students considering gender and the main reason for using the internet

There is a significant difference between the number of hours using smartphones during and after school. On average, students spent  $5.40 \pm 2.79$  using phones the week, while at the weekends they spent on average  $9.71 \pm 8.80$ . The differences are also important. For all countries, the number of hours was higher during the weekend compared to weekdays, and for some countries (Turkey and Romania), the number of hours is doubled.

The answers provided by respondents from all the countries involved in the research showed considerably different limits regarding the use of the internet.

**Table 10.** Use of the internet and phone – results by country

| Country   | Mean age of the first phone | Hours on social media during the week | Hours on social media during the weekend |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Italy     | M = $10.98 \pm 1.57$        | M = $6.26 \pm 2.91$                   | M = $7.99 \pm 5.24$                      |
| Greece    | M = $12.07 \pm 2.29$        | M = $2.50 \pm 1.26$                   | M = $3.14 \pm 1.86$                      |
| Lithuania | M = $8.06 \pm 1.87$         | M = $3.97 \pm 2.68$                   | M = $5.50 \pm 3.73$                      |
| Portugal  | M = $10.53 \pm 1.50$        | M = $4.80 \pm 2.58$                   | M = $6.86 \pm 6.56$                      |
| Romania   | M = $10.24 \pm 2.43$        | M = $5.53 \pm 2.75$                   | M = $10.82 \pm 9.56$                     |
| Turkey    | M = $9.83 \pm 2.39$         | M = $5.37 \pm 2.69$                   | M = $10.76 \pm 9.61$                     |

<sup>1</sup>Means and standard deviations (M±D)

Students were also asked to rate from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) how often they talked on the internet with people they knew. More than a quarter of them

sustained that they never chatted on the internet with acquaintances. The distribution of their answers is presented in *Table 11*.

**Table 11.** Distribution of answers for the item investigating the frequency of chatting on the internet with acquaintances

| <i>How often do you chat with people that you know on the internet?</i> | <b>N, %</b>         |
|---|---------------------|
| Never   | 526, 27.8%          |
| Occasionally  | 391, 20.7%          |
| Sometimes   | 428, 22.6%          |
| Often   | 309, 16.3%          |
| Very often  | 237, 12.5%          |
|   | $M = 2.65 \pm 1.36$ |

Children and teenagers were asked if their parents restricted their mobile phone access. More than half of them ( $n = 1099$ , 58.12%) declared that their parents never restricted their access to smartphones, a quarter of them ( $n = 476$ , 25.17%) sustained that sometimes their parents restricted their access to smartphones, while the others mentioned that their parents were doing that frequently ( $n = 152$ , 8.04%) or all the time ( $n = 164$ , 8.67%).

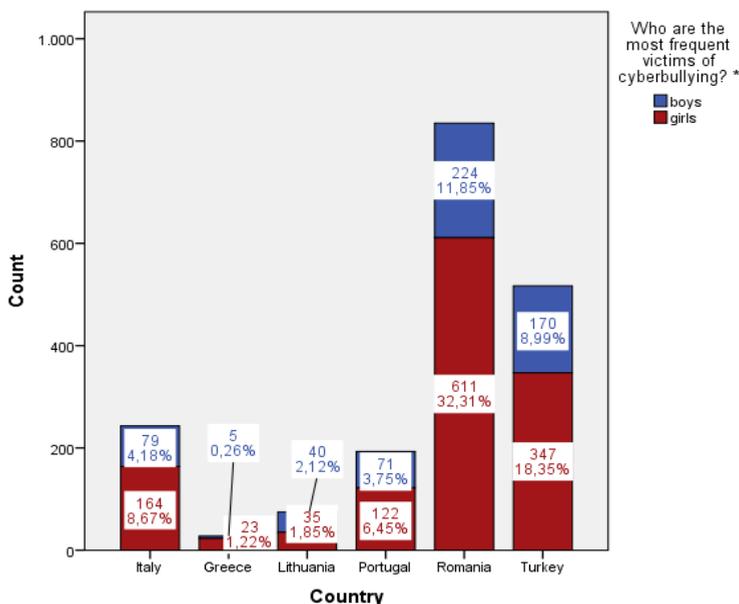
Students were also asked if their parents blamed them for using their mobile phones too much. Detailed results are presented in *Table 12*.

**Table 12.** Distribution of answers for the items investigating parents' attitude regarding the use of mobile phones

|              | <i>Do your parents blame you for using your mobile phone too much</i> | <i>Do your parents restrict your mobile phone access</i> |
|--------------|---|--|
| never        | 396, 20.9%  | 1099, 58.1%  |
| sometimes    | 1082, 57.2%   | 476, 25.2%   |
| frequent     | 197, 10.4%  | 152, 8.0%  |
| all the time | 216, 11.4%  | 164, 8.7%  |

### *Bullying and cyberbullying behaviours*

More than three-quarters of the students (77%,  $N = 1457$ ) stated they did not have classmates who cyberbullied others. Participants were also asked their opinion about who were the most frequent victims of cyberbullying. In about three-quarters of the cases, more than half of the participants ( $n = 1302$ , 68.85%) considered girls were the most common victims of cyberbullying, except in Lithuania, where the situation was different. The distribution of answers according to the country is presented in *Figure 9*.



**Figure 9.** Distribution of answers

One item investigated their opinion about who was the most frequent person who cyberbullied the others, and the answers were the following: a boy ( $n = 588$ ), a girl ( $n = 112$ ), and more than half considered that the bully was a boy or a girl, equally ( $n = 1191$ , 63.0%).

Participants were asked if they had been victims of cyberbullying, if they had cyberbullied others, or if they had witnessed cyberbullying. Most students said they had never been the victim of cyberbullying (77.5%,  $N = 1465$ ), and that they had never cyberbullied other children (89.5%,  $N = 1693$ ), and more than half of them said they had seen other children being bullied online (50.9%,  $N = 963$ ).

**Table 13.** Cyberbullying behaviours

| Cyberbullying behaviours   | Total M±S.D and % | M±S.D and %  |              |
|--|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
|  |                   | Boys         | Girls        |
| <i>Have you ever been bullied online (via email, chatroom, cellphone)?</i> | 1.26 ± 0.55       | 1.24 ± 0.52  | 1.28 ± 0.57  |
| Never  | 1465 (77.5%)      | 686 (36.28%) | 779 (41.20%) |
| A few times  | 368 (19.5%)       | 153 (8.09%)  | 215 (11.37%) |
| Many times   | 36 (1.9%)         | 17 (0.90%)   | 19 (1.00%)   |
| Very frequent  | 22 (1.2%)         | 7 (0.37%)    | 15 (0.79%)   |
| <i>Have you ever bullied others while online?</i>                          | 1.12 ± 0.39       | 1.12 ± 0.42  | 1.11 ± 0.37  |

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| Cyberbullying behaviours | Total M±S.D and % | M±S.D and %  |              |
|--------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|
|                          |                   | Boys         | Girls        |
| Never                    | 1693 (89.5%)      | 773 (40.88%) | 920 (48.65%) |
| A few times              | 172 (9.1%)        | 76 (4.02%)   | 96 (5.08%)   |
| Many times               | 16 (0.8%)         | 7 (0.37%)    | 9 (0.48%)    |
| Very frequent            | 10 (0.5%)         | 3 (0.16%)    | 7 (0.37%)    |

Regarding the reporting of an online bullying incident in the classroom or school, less than half of the students stated that they had not seen other children being bullied online in the classroom or school (44.3%, N = 837), and 54.2% children (N = 1024) had not reported any incident about a child being bullied online (messages, social media, chatrooms) because they had not seen any. Detailed results are presented in *Table 14*.

**Table 14.** Reporting a cyberbullying behaviour

|  |              |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Have you ever reported to an adult when you saw a kid being bullied online (messages, social media, enol, chatrooms etc)?</b> | 6.34 ± 2.52  |
| Yes, to my parent  | 230 (12.2%)  |
| Yes, to the kid's parent   | 63 (3.3%)    |
| Yes, to a teacher  | 105 (5.6%)   |
| Yes, to the school psychologist  | 22 (1.2%)    |
| Yes, to the principal  | 11 (0.6%)    |
| To other adult   | 68 (3.6%)    |
| No, I did not report any incident  | 368 (19.5%)  |
| No, I did not report any incident because I did not see any  | 1024 (54.2%) |

*Rosenberg self-esteem scale*

Global self-esteem scores as measured with the RSES ranged from 17 up to 30 (M = 24.19 ± 1.92), most students having normal self-esteem (77.8%, N = 1471). For the present study, the Cronbach Alpha score was 0.865.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in total Rosenberg scores among the countries of origin: Italy (N = 243), Greece (N = 28), Lithuania (N = 75), Portugal (N = 193), Romania (N = 835), and Turkey (N = 517).

The distributions of RSES scores were not similar for all groups, as assessed by a visual inspection of a boxplot. The median RSES scores were statistically significantly different between the countries,  $\chi^2(5) = 43.699$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Subsequently, pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn's (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Adjusted  $p$ -values are presented. This post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences in median RSES scores between Portugal (24.00) and Turkey (25.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ), Portugal (24.00) and Lithuania (25.00) ( $p = 0.001$ ), and Romania (24.00) and Turkey (25.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ), but not between any other country group combination.

*Loneliness scale*

The total score for the Loneliness scale was on average  $M = 39.76 \pm 10.47$ , the scores ranging from 20 (0.2%,  $N = 3$ ) to 75 (0.1%,  $N = 1$ ).

More than half of the students (53.6%,  $N = 1014$ ) had a moderate level of loneliness, and more than one-third had a high level of loneliness (35.4%,  $N = 669$ ).

The scale had a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.880.

The analysis of the data identified significant differences at this scale in terms of participants' gender ( $U = 418113.500$ ,  $Z = -2.154$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ) in the sense that female subjects had a higher score on loneliness ( $Mdn = 39.00$ ) compared to male respondents ( $Mdn = 38.00$ ).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in Total Loneliness scores between countries of origin: Italy ( $N = 243$ ), Greece ( $N = 28$ ), Lithuania ( $N = 75$ ), Portugal ( $N = 193$ ), Romania ( $N = 835$ ), and Turkey ( $N = 517$ ).

The distributions of the Loneliness scores were not similar for all groups, as assessed by a visual inspection of a boxplot. Median Loneliness scores were statistically significantly different between the countries,  $\chi^2(5) = 32.315$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Subsequently, pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn's (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Adjusted  $p$ -values are presented. This post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences in median Loneliness scores between Lithuania (38.00) and Italy (42.00) ( $p = 0.019$ ), Turkey (37.00) and Italy (42.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ) and Romania (38.00) and Italy (42.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ), but not between any other country group combination.

Also, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in UCLA scores between family affluence groups: low ( $N = 239$ ), medium ( $N = 718$ ) and high ( $N = 934$ ). The distributions of CYVIC were not similar for all groups, as assessed by a visual inspection of a boxplot. The median UCLA scores were statistically significantly different between the countries,  $\chi^2(2) = 18.245$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.027$ ,  $U = 101413.00$ ,  $z = -2.214$ ) showed that children who had low family affluence ( $Mdn = 16.00$ ) had a lower level of Loneliness than children who had high family affluence ( $Mdn = 17.00$ ).

*Cyber-aggression Scale*

The Cronbach Alpha score was 0.914 for the total scale, 0.849 for indirect cyber aggression, and 0.904 for direct cyber aggression. For Cyber-aggression subscales, we obtained the following results: *Indirect Cyber Aggression* -  $M = 9.86 \pm 3.54$ , *Direct Cyber Aggression* -  $M = 10.70 \pm 2.74$ . The results proved that respondents did not have such a high level of cyber aggression. The total CYB-AGS score was on average  $M = 20.57 \pm 5.81$ , with scores ranging from 18 (51.9%,  $N = 981$ ) to 90 (0.1%,  $N = 1$ ).

**Table 15.** Gender differences for CYB-AGS Scale

| Subscales        | Median |       | Mann Whitney U | Z      | p     |
|------------------|--------|-------|----------------|--------|-------|
|                  | Boys   | Girls |                |        |       |
| Indirect CYB-AGS | 8.00   | 8.00  | 418098.500     | -2.362 | 0.018 |
| Direct CYB-AGS   | 10.00  | 10.00 | 432804.000     | -1.319 | 0.187 |
| Total CYB-AGS    | 18.00  | 19.00 | 416863.000     | -2.440 | 0.015 |

Significant differences were found in terms of participants' gender and school environment, in the sense that boys and children living in a city had lower scores on the CYB-AGS scale than girls and children living in a village. *Tables 15* and *Table 16* present the results for the subscales.

**Table 16.** School environment differences for CYB-AGS Scale

| School environment | Median |         | Mann Whitney U | Z      | p     |
|--------------------|--------|---------|----------------|--------|-------|
|                    | City   | Village |                |        |       |
| Indirect CYB-AGS   | 8.00   | 9.00    | 80060.000      | -3.075 | 0.002 |
| Direct CYB-AGS     | 10.00  | 10.00   | 89073.500      | -1.680 | 0.093 |
| Total CYB-AGS      | 18.00  | 19.00   | 80182.000      | -3.005 | 0.003 |

A Mann Whitney test ( $U = 20547.00$ ,  $Z = -2.636$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ) showed that there were significant differences on the CYB-AGS scale in terms of participants' satisfaction with the relationship with parents, in the sense that children who were very dissatisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ) had a higher score on this scale compared to children who were very satisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 18.00$ ). Also, the comparative analysis ( $U = 277813.50$ ,  $Z = -2.212$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ) showed that children who had at least one parent working abroad ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ) had a higher score on the CYB-AGS scale than children whose parents worked in their home country ( $Mdn = 18.00$ ).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the CYB-AGS scores among the country-of-origin groups: Italy ( $N = 243$ ), Greece ( $N = 28$ ), Lithuania ( $N = 75$ ), Portugal ( $N = 193$ ), Romania ( $N = 835$ ), and Turkey ( $N = 517$ ). The distributions of CYB-AGS were not similar for all groups, as assessed by visual inspection of a boxplot. The median CYB-AGS scores were statistically significantly different between these groups,  $\chi^2(5) = 289.740$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 1546.00$ ,  $z = -4.811$ ) showed that children from Italy ( $Mdn = 20.00$ ) had a lower level of the CYB-AGS scale than children from Greece ( $Mdn = 26.00$ ), but Italian students ( $Mdn = 20.00$ ) had a higher level of the CYB-AGS scale than Portuguese students ( $Mdn = 18.00$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 16565.00$ ,  $z = -5.527$ ), Romanian students ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ) ( $p = 0.021$ ,  $U = 91928.50$ ,  $z = -2.307$ ), and Turkish students ( $Mdn = 18.00$ ) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 31499.00$ ,  $z = -13.085$ ).

Also, the Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 402.00$ ,  $z = -4.894$ ) showed that students from Greece had the highest score on the CYB-AGS

scale (Mdn = 26.00) compared to students from Lithuania (Mdn = 19.00), students from Portugal (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 671.00$ ,  $z = -6.914$ ), students from Romania (Mdn = 19.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 4501.50$ ,  $z = -5.738$ ), and students from Turkey (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 1101.50$ ,  $z = -10.182$ ).

The results of Mann-Whitney post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.006$ ,  $U = 5801.50$ ,  $z = -2.739$ ) showed that Lithuanian children had a higher score on the CYB-AGS scale (Mdn = 19.00) compared to Portuguese (Mdn = 18.00) and Turkish children (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 11375.00$ ,  $z = -7.656$ ). Also, students from Romania (Mdn = 19.00) had a higher score on the CYB-AGS scale compared to students from Portugal (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 64277.50$ ,  $z = -4.596$ ) and Turkey (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 125608.50$ ,  $z = -14.258$ ).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the CYB-AGS scores between family affluence groups: low ( $N = 239$ ), medium ( $N = 718$ ) and high ( $N = 934$ ). The distributions of the CYB-AGS were not similar for all groups, as assessed by visual inspection of a boxplot. The median CYB-AGS scores were statistically significantly different between these groups,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.341$ ,  $p = 0.006$ . The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.012$ ,  $U = 100686.00$ ,  $z = -2.504$ ) showed that children who had low family affluence (Mdn = 18.00) had a lower score on the CYB-AGS scale than children who had high family affluence (Mdn = 19.00).

#### *Cyber victimization Questionnaire*

The total score for cyber victimization was on average  $M = 18.68 \pm 4.78$ , with scores ranging from 15 (29.2%,  $N = 552$ ) to 47 (0.1%,  $N = 1$ ). The scale had a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.885 for the total scale: 0.651- for impersonation, 0.638 – for visual-sexual cyber victimization, 0.813 - for written-verbal cyber victimization, and 0.611 for online exclusion.

There are significant differences at this scale in terms of participants' gender ( $U = 387459.500$ ,  $Z = -4.820$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) in the sense that girls had a higher score on cyber victimization (Mdn = 18.00) compared to boys (Mdn = 17.00).

The Mann-Whitney test ( $U = 418611.00$ ,  $Z = -2.305$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ) showed that there were significant differences at the online exclusion subscale in terms of the sex of the participants, in the sense that boys (Mdn = 3.00) had a lower score at this subscale compared to girls (Mdn = 4.00). No other gender differences were identified for the other subscales of CYVIC.

Also, there were significant differences at this scale in terms of living environment ( $U = 293797.00$ ,  $Z = -8.453$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) in the sense that children living in cities had a lower score on cyber victimization (Mdn = 16.00) compared to children living in villages (Mdn = 18.00). Other significant differences in the subscales of the CYVIC questionnaire are mentioned in *Table 17*.

**Table 17.** Living environment differences for CYVIC Subscales

| Subscales                          | Median |         | Mann Whitney U | Z       | p     |
|------------------------------------|--------|---------|----------------|---------|-------|
|                                    | City   | Village |                |         |       |
| Impersonation                      | 3.00   | 3.00    | 350010.50      | -4.751  | 0.000 |
| Visual-sexual cyber victimization  | 3.00   | 3.00    | 361471.00      | -3.555  | 0.000 |
| Written-verbal cyber victimization | 7.00   | 8.00    | 292746.00      | -8.728  | 0.000 |
| Online exclusion                   | 3.00   | 4.00    | 336667.00      | - 4.481 | 0.000 |

The Mann Whitney test ( $U = 17168.00$ ,  $Z = - 4.073$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed that there were significant differences at the CYVIC scale in terms of participants' satisfaction with the relationship with their parents, in the sense that children who were very satisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 16.00$ ) had a lower score on this scale compared to children who were very dissatisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the CYVIC scores between the level of education of mothers groups: primary school ( $N = 127$ ), secondary school ( $N = 259$ ), high school ( $N = 768$ ), university ( $N = 601$ ), and I do not know ( $N = 136$ ). Distributions of the CYVIC were not similar for all groups, as assessed by a visual inspection of a boxplot. The median CYVIC scores were statistically significantly different between these groups,  $\chi^2(4) = 26.895$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 28333.50$ ,  $z = -4.657$ ) showed that children whose mothers had a primary school level of education ( $Mdn = 16.00$ ) had a lower level of CYVIC scale than children whose mothers had a university level of education ( $Mdn = 17.00$ ).

Also, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the CYVIC scores between the level of education of fathers groups: primary school ( $N = 94$ ), secondary school ( $N = 263$ ), high school ( $N = 765$ ), university ( $N = 588$ ) and I do not know ( $N = 181$ ). The median CYVIC scores were statistically significantly different between these groups,  $\chi^2(4) = 20.440$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.003$ ,  $U = 22454.50$ ,  $z = -2.991$ ) showed that children whose fathers had a low level of education (primary school -  $Mdn = 16.00$ ) also had a lower level of the CYVIC scale than children whose fathers had a higher level of education (university -  $Mdn = 17.00$ ).

The Mann-Whitney test ( $U = 17168.00$ ,  $Z = - 4.073$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed that there were significant differences at the CYVIC scale in terms of participants' satisfaction with the relationship with their parents, in the sense that children who were very satisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 16.00$ ) had a lower score on this scale compared to the children who were very dissatisfied with the relationship with their parents ( $Mdn = 19.00$ ).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the CYVIC scores between countries of origin. The median CYVIC scores were

statistically significantly different between these groups,  $\chi^2(5) = 382.838$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.009$ ,  $U = 2383.00$ ,  $z = -2.610$ ) showed that children from Italy (Mdn = 18.00) had a lower level of CYVIC scale than children from Greece (Mdn = 20.00), but a higher level of the CYVIC scale than children from Portugal (Mdn = 16.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 16562.00$ ,  $z = -5.336$ ) and Turkey (Mdn = 15.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 28664.50$ ,  $z = -12.780$ ).

Also, the Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.007$ ,  $U = 686.00$ ,  $z = -2.716$ ) showed that students from Greece had the highest score on the CYVIC scale (Mdn = 20.00) compared to students from Lithuania (Mdn = 17.00), students from Portugal (Mdn = 16.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 1293.50$ ,  $z = -4.566$ ), students from Romania (Mdn = 18.00) ( $p = 0.036$ ,  $U = 8979.00$ ,  $z = -2.100$ ), and students from Turkey (Mdn = 15.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 1930.50$ ,  $z = -7.300$ ). At the same time, students from Romania (Mdn = 18.00) had a higher score on CYVIC scale compared to students from Lithuania (Mdn = 17.00), ( $p = 0.041$ ,  $U = 26886.50$ ,  $z = -2.041$ ) Portugal (Mdn = 16.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 53187.00$ ,  $z = -7.417$ ), and Turkey (Mdn = 15.00) ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $U = 89938.00$ ,  $z = -18.375$ ).

#### *Parenting Styles and Dimensions questionnaire*

The total score for the PSDQ scale was on average  $M = 120.04 \pm 17.11$ , the scores ranging from 38 (0.1%,  $N = 1$ ) to 190 (0.2%,  $N = 3$ ). The Cronbach Alpha score was 0.773. Detailed results about the PSDQ subscales are presented in *Table 18*.

**Table 18.** PSDQ Subscales

| Subscales             | M±S.D.       | Cronbach Alpha |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Supportive parents    | 27.61 ± 4.67 | 0.214          |
| Controlling parents   | 27.17 ± 5.55 | 0.624          |
| Compassionate parents | 28.04 ± 4.87 | 0.280          |
| Aggressive parents    | 15.11 ± 3.33 | 0.367          |
| Avoidant parents      | 10.41 ± 3.15 | 0.650          |
| Orthodox parents      | 11.68 ± 2.51 | 0.336          |

There were significant differences on this scale in terms of participants' gender ( $U = 402290.00$ ,  $Z = -3.492$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in the sense that girls had a lower score on the PSDQ scale (Mdn = 121.00) compared to boys (Mdn = 124.00).

The Mann-Whitney test ( $U = 333995.00$ ,  $Z = -4.678$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed that there were significant differences on this scale between children living in a city (Mdn = 124.00) who had higher scores on this scale than children who lived in a village (Mdn = 119).

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in the PSDQ scores between family affluence groups: low ( $N = 239$ ), medium ( $N = 718$ ) and high ( $N = 934$ ). The distributions of PSDQ were not similar for all groups, as assessed by a visual inspection of a boxplot.

The median PSDQ scores were statistically significantly different between the countries,  $\chi^2(2) = 15.592$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.001$ ,  $U = 96457.500$ ,  $z = -3.244$ ) showed that children who had low family affluence ( $Mdn = 119.00$ ) had lower scores of the PSDQ scale than children who had high family affluence ( $Mdn = 124.00$ ). Also, the Mann-Whitney U post hoc analysis ( $p = 0.002$ ,  $U = 305723.500$ ,  $z = -3.079$ ) showed that children who had high family affluence ( $Mdn = 124.00$ ) had a higher score at the PSDQ scale than children who had medium family affluence ( $Mdn = 122.00$ ).

### *Correlation results*

The results showed that there was a positive correlation between the total score of the CYB-AGS and the relationship between parents ( $r = 0.067^{**}$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). Thus, we identified the fact that the more conflicted, or, worse, the relationship between the parents did not exist, the more the children obtained a higher score on the CYB-AGS scale. Similarly, the CYB-AGS score was negatively correlated with children's satisfaction with the relationship with their friends ( $r = -0.112^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in the sense that the more dissatisfied the children were with this relationship, the more likely these children were to become cyber aggressors.

A strong positive correlation was identified between the total score of the CYB-AGS and the item that refers to the frequency with which children were victims of cyberbullying. Thus, the results ( $r = 0.250^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed that the more often it happened that children were the victims of cyberbullying, the higher the score on the CYB-AGS scale. In addition, the greater the family's affluence was, the more likely children were to be cyber aggressors ( $r = 0.079^{**}$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ).

Similar results to those presented above were also identified for the CYVIC scale. Thus, the relationship between parents ( $r = 0.119^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), the frequency with which children happened to be victims of cyberbullying ( $r = 0.260^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and family affluence ( $r = 0.059^*$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ) were positively correlated with the scores obtained on the CYVIC scale, in the sense that the more conflictive the parents' relationship was, the more the children were terrorized online more often, and the greater the family's affluence was, the greater the aggression suffered by children through the Internet.

A negative correlation was identified between the CYVIC score and students' satisfaction with the relationship with their friends ( $r = -0.158^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), meaning that the less satisfied they were with their friends' relationship, the more likely they were to become victims of cyberbullying. A positive correlation was identified between the responses to the item on how often children bullied others while online and the CYVIC scales ( $r = 0.237^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), in the sense that the higher the level of cyberaggression was, the higher the scores of children on this scale.

Regarding the correlational results between the subscales of the two instruments mentioned above and other items, the results showed that the higher the level of loneliness and the higher the age of the children, the higher the scores on these subscales related to cyber aggression direct or indirect, impersonation,

online exclusion, visual-sexual and written-verbal cyber victimization. In addition, some of the parenting styles negatively correlated with the results obtained in these subscales, which means that different types of parents predisposed children to obtain higher overall scores of cyber aggression and cyber victimization.

Details regarding these significant correlations are presented in *Table 19*.

**Table 19.** Correlational results of the CYB-AGS and CYVIC subscales

| Items   | Indirect CYB-AGS          | Direct CYB-AGS            | Impersonation            | Visual-sexual CYVIC      | Written verbal CYVIC      | Online exclusion          |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>FAS scale</i>                                  | no correlation            | r = -0.087**<br>p = 0.000 | no correlation           | no correlation           | r = 0.056*<br>p = 0.015   | r = 0.053*<br>p = 0.022   |
| <i>UCLA scale</i>                                 | r = 0.139**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.107**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.150**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.199**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.257**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.372**<br>p = 0.000  |
| <i>Have you ever been bullied online?</i>         | r = 0.256**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.185**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.144**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.232**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.249**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.197**<br>p = 0.000  |
| <i>Have you ever bullied others while online?</i> | r = 0.139**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.262**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.144**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.213**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.231**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.183**<br>p = 0.000  |
| <i>PSDQ scale</i>                                 | r = -0.100**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.059**<br>p = 0.010 | no correlation           | no correlation           | r = -0.105**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.102**<br>p = 0.000 |
| <i>Age</i>  | r = 0.229**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.110**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.070**<br>p = 0.002 | r = 0.068**<br>p = 0.003 | r = 0.316**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.151**<br>p = 0.000  |

*Table 20* presents the correlation results between parenting styles and other relevant items. Thus, it is observed that the mother's level of education is positively correlated with almost all parenting styles, in the sense that the higher the mother's level of education, the more likely they were to become a supportive, controlling, compassionate, avoidant, or orthodox parent. In contrast, the relationship between parents evaluated from the children's perspective was negatively correlated with almost all parenting styles, while family's affluence was negatively correlated with controlling and aggressive parenting styles, and positively correlated with supportive, compassionate, avoidant, and orthodox parenting styles. In addition, the results showed that supportive and controlling parenting styles were negatively correlated with cyber aggression scores, in the sense that the better the parents fitted into these parenting styles, the lower the level of cyber aggression.

**Table 20.** Correlational results of PSDQ subscales

| Items                               | Supportive parents        | Controlling parents       | Compassionate parents     | Aggressive parents        | Avoidant parents          | Orthodox parents          |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Mothers' levels of education</i> | r = 0.059*<br>p = 0.011   | r = -0.066**<br>p = 0.004 | r = 0.073**<br>p = 0.002  | no correlation            | r = 0.108**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.095*<br>p = 0.000   |
| <i>Relationship between parents</i> | r = -0.157**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.132**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.156**<br>p = 0.000 | no correlation            | r = -0.183**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.800**<br>p = 0.000 |
| <i>FAS scale</i>                    | r = 0.110**<br>p = 0.000  | r = -0.067**<br>p = 0.004 | r = 0.170**<br>p = 0.000  | r = -0.101**<br>p = 0.000 | r = 0.250**<br>p = 0.000  | r = 0.096**<br>p = 0.000  |
| <i>CYB-AGS score</i>                | r = -0.076**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.191**<br>p = 0.000 | no correlation            | no correlation            | no correlation            | no correlation            |
| <i>CYVIC scores</i>                 | r = -0.107**<br>p = 0.000 | r = -0.203**<br>p = 0.000 | no correlation            | no correlation            | no correlation            | r = 0.059**<br>p = 0.010  |

Also, the scores on the cybervictimization scale were positively correlated with the orthodox parental style, and negatively correlated with the supportive and controlling parental styles, in the sense that the better the parents fitted into the conventional parenting typology, the higher the level of cybervictimization. On the other hand, the better the parents fitted into the supportive and controlling parenting styles, the lower the level of cyber victimization (detailed results are presented in *Table 20*).

## **Discussion**

According to Statista (2021), in 2021, over 3.6 billion people used social media sites to connect with others. This number is projected to increase to 4.4 billion by 2025.

A person may experience feelings of anonymity and invisibility while communicating online, and this “protection” may give students the courage to say or do things that they would not do in real life. This is known as the “online disinhibition effect.” In the present study, we identified that more than 45% of students witnessed cyberbullying incidents. Cyberbullying has important effects on the mental health of the victim and the witnesses.

Numerous studies mention the fact that the aggressors have a history of being victims (in the family, school, or social context), and the witnesses can have active or passive negative behaviour, both situations generating, in fact, a co-participation in online aggression.

The results of the present study showed that more than half of the students had a moderate or high level of loneliness, and we found that girls had higher scores than boys. The scientific data about loneliness is controversial. For example, Leung (2002) identified that high rates of loneliness are related to dishonesty, negative, and a lower quality of self-disclosure in online communication, while Morahan-Martin & Schumacher (2000) showed that lonely people were more willing to self-disclose, were friendlier, and made friends online more easily compared to non-lonely individuals. Hunt et al. (2018) found that the use of social networks is a protective factor against loneliness, helping lonely people to better interact with each other. Hanley-Dunn et al. (1985) found that individuals who experienced loneliness were more likely to negatively interpret the actions and intentions of other people (neighbour, a family member, or authority figure).

The results of the present study highlighted that there were some factors strongly related to the presence of cybervictimisation and cyberaggression: age (middle school students reported a higher frequency of bullying and cyberbullying than did high school students); gender (girls were more prone to experiencing cyberbullying than boys); living environment (children from urban areas experienced cyberbullying more often than those living in a village); the number of hours spent on the internet (the risk for cyberbullying increased for those spending more time on the internet); social-family-related factors (such as family affluence, the level of education of parents, the level of satisfaction with the

relationships with their parents and parenting styles, as well as type of the family – results showing that having one parent working abroad increased the risk for cyberaggression types); the presence of psychological aspects (such as high-level loneliness and low self-confidence).

Some studies have identified loneliness as a predictor factor for cyber-victimisation. Findings suggested that time spent interacting on SNs was, in fact, time spent not engaging in face-to-face interaction, increasing the feelings of perceived loneliness. On the other hand, lonely people seemed to be more interactive in online communication than people with a low level of loneliness. The explanations of the authors are related to the tendency of lonely people to be more open to self-disclosure in the virtual world and to make friends online more easily than non-lonely people. (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003). Our results showed that more than half of the parents limited the time spent on the internet.

Loneliness was also associated with the number of hours spent on the internet. It was strongly proved that the time spent on SNs was frequently associated with mental health problems (depression, stress, addiction). But the results are still controversial. For example, in a longitudinal study, Coyne et al. (2020) showed that the time spent on SNs was not associated with a higher level of mental problems among adolescents aged 13-20, while Michikyan, in a previous study (2019), identified that teenagers with depressive symptoms were two times more prone to experiencing negative emotions while spending more time on the internet.

The present results identified that parents are a key factor in the cyberbullying phenomenon. A good relationship with parents, good relationship between parents, and supportive parental control were strongly related to a low level of cyberaggression and cybervictimisation. These data are important due to the fact that the most teachers consider that cyberbullying exceeds the school space, so the responsibility is more outside than inside the school. In this case, parents are considered the responsible adults that can prevent and intervene in cases of cyberbullying. The results of the study are also in line with students' perceptions – the parent being the adult, the most frequently students report bullying and cyberbullying incidents. A strong relationship with their parents empowers students and increases their self-confidence. Also, a positive relationship between the members of the family provides a strong model for conflict resolution and helps to avoid or deal with potentially aggressive incidents. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) determined that both aggressors and victims had lower emotional bonds with their families, and lower parental control compared to those not involved in such incidents.

The debates regarding students' desire (or, rather, the lack of desire) to share aggressive events in the online environment with teachers or decision-makers in the schools where they study have various reasons. Numerous studies have identified the fact that the attitude of teachers in the face of physical or online aggression is extremely important. Teachers who are perceived to be intolerant of

aggressive acts are more likely to become victims' confidants and to be asked, in general, for help, in the case of cyberbullying or bullying incidents. Also, if the students believe that the rules imposed by the school are strictly respected, they will have a much-reduced tendency to practice acts of aggression within the school or among colleagues. It is also important to note that the availability of students to share or report incidents of cyberbullying to adults has different rationales, with most of the students orienting themselves towards their parents and less towards the teaching staff.

## Conclusion

Together with the increase of the cyberbullying phenomenon, both cybervictimization and cyberaggression were found to be related to different factors. Age, gender, socio-economic status, school grade, satisfaction with the relationship with family and friends, family-related details (parents' level of education or characteristics of the family functioning type), parental style, or the presence of loneliness were found to be strongly related to cybervictimization and cyberaggression scores.

The results of the present research must be taken into consideration when working with adolescents. Considering the most common risk factors and the involvement of parents and friends in preventing and fighting cyberbullying could assure the success in diminishing the negative impact of victimization and aggression among adolescents.

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# CYBERBULLYING IN ITALY. CREATE AN ANTI-(CYBER) BULLYING CULTURE: METHODS AND TOOLS

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**Matteo AGATI**

## **Introduction**

A culture of (cyber) bullying is defined as the acceptance, facilitation, or continuation of harmful practice. Bullying culture is also fostered by how people perceive bullying and how they react to it. Some people, for example, still consider that bullying is unimportant or that it “*simply happens*”. Others either engage in bullying or see it but remain silent about it due to fear or other factors. Each of the previous perceptions contributes to the (cyber) bullying culture, with indifference being the most powerful enabler.

As far as bullying is concerned, there seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel. A growing number of people are taking a stand against bullying and pushing others to do the same.

Teachers and school staff are being trained more and more. The school world is becoming aware of the importance of developing a positive teacher/student relationship as well as the importance of promoting and encouraging prosocial behaviour.

It is critical to recognize that silence, apathy, and indifference are among the most significant enablers of bullying. Every time someone stands up and denounces bullying, they are going a step closer to making it a thing of the past.

It is stated that the only method to overcome the culture of (cyber) bullying is to adopt and rigorously implement an anti-bullying culture. However, before an anti-bullying culture can emerge, there must be a comprehensive and widespread awareness of bullying and all of its ramifications. For this reason, it was considered essential to draw attention to the importance of reporting incidents of cyberbullying as soon as possible, before the person who has been bullied falls into depression and hurts themselves

## **Cyberbullying in Italy. Research and Statistics**

According to ISTAT (2014), in Italy, over 50% of adolescents complained of being subjected to violent actions; in particular, 19.8% of boys and girls between 11 and 19 years old have been victims of aggressive behaviours both physical and verbal. In addition, online bullying was described as a widespread phenomenon in the country since similar incidences were found in different Italian regions. (Brighi et al., 2011)

Due to the fact that the phenomenon was already diffused (around 10%) among Italian pre-adolescents, the Italian law aimed at preventing and identifying cyberbullying in all its forms. The paper of Guarini et al. (2019) showed that interventional programs have a lot of success, both among students and teachers. For example, after training on cyberbullying, students were more likely to consider the different roles in cyberbullying, such as cyberbully, cybervictim, reinforce/assistant, defender, and bystander/observer, while teachers improved their social coping and cognitive coping strategies so trained teachers can increase the awareness of cyberbullying among students and improve their effective coping strategies to address cyberbullying.

Another research conducted by Sorrentino et al. (2018) presented The Tabby (Threat Assessment of Bullying Behaviour among Youngsters) Improved Prevention and Intervention Program (TIPIP). The project was developed in, and the researchers conducted teachers' training, school conferences with parents, distributed online materials and taught students about cyberbullying. The results of the project revealed that both cyberbullying and cybervictimization decreased in the experimental group compared to the control after the intervention, but when presenting gender differences, the decrease in both cyberbullying and cybervictimization was statistically significant for boys but not for girls.

The research conducted by Tintori et al. (2021) on 3,273 Italian adolescents showed that 7.4% of the respondents evaluated them as being tolerant of bullying and cyberbullying. Data provided by the police department reported that 235 cases of cyberbullying were identified in 2016.

Cyberstalking is also a problem in Italy. On average, 18.7% of men and 21.5% of women were reported as being victims of stalking. (Macri et al. 2012). In the study of Begotti et al. (2022), almost half of the adults included in the research (48.3%) reported being victims of cyberstalking through online contact, 30.2% through online harassment, 42.1% through unwanted sexual advances online, 17.8% through online threats of violence, and 16.9% through online identity fraud.

Due to the fact that many studies, incidents, and public interventions showed that Italian students seemed to underestimate the negative effect of cyberbullying on victim's psychological well-being, Italian laws are strongly regimenting online aggression and educational programs were successfully implemented in the last decade. (Saladino et al., 2020)

## **Six Ideas to Create an Anti-(Cyber) Bullying Culture**

Many tools can be used to build a culture to limit—if not eliminate—bullying within our institutions and, more broadly, in our society.

The following are the six main ideas for implementing this culture. It is important to emphasize that because these ideas can yield the desired results, they must be implemented in their entirety and as a whole. For this reason, this may be considered a purely holistic approach.

### *Friendly Physical Environment*

Considering that more than a sixth of the European population, including several million children spend most of their days in public schools, the physical environment in which they work, learn, and play is crucial to fostering a healthy school atmosphere that improves learning and enhances health.

For that reason, European nations need to invest heavily in state-of-the-art school facilities, trying to make the environment as friendly and welcoming as possible.

### *Uplifting Students' Voices*

A positive school climate encourages students to take initiative, promotes autonomy, and allows them to participate in essential decision-making processes. To effectively develop a healthy school environment, consistent and purposeful attempts to engage young people in choosing and shaping what their school should be are required. Allowing students to participate in school-wide choices promotes self-esteem and leadership abilities while also increasing the likelihood of policy adoption and overall success.

### *Encourage Prosocial Behaviours*

Prosocial behaviours, such as saying a kind word to a classmate, respecting other students' feelings, giving books and advice, and protecting a bully victim are just a few examples of prosocial behaviours that can improve students' social and academic lives at school. Because children do not learn social ideals in a vacuum, educators, politicians, and researchers are increasingly stressing the school's role in helping them develop prosocial abilities. Positive activities that benefit others, motivated by empathy, moral principles, and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for self-gain, are referred to as "prosocial behaviour." According to child development research, schoolwide programs meant to educate and model social skills are one of the most successful strategies for schools to encourage prosocial conduct.

### *Developing Positive Teachers-Students Relationships*

Developing a positive relationship between students and teachers is one of the most valuable elements if we are trying to get rid of bullying from our society. What teachers must understand first is that the relationship between them and their students is a two-way process: it is not only the younger ones who need to learn what their teachers are trying to convey to them, but teachers must also be the ones who learn what their students are trying to communicate to them, so that they create an empathetic relationship with them, first and foremost by taking an interest in their lives.

By engaging students, forming relationships, controlling the classroom, serving as positive role models for prosocial behaviours, and enforcing school rules, teachers play a vital role in creating a supportive atmosphere. Teachers

establish the tone of the classroom, and, more than the students themselves, are a school's most important resource in the fight against bullying. When teachers are able to form strong relationships with students who are difficult to educate and have behaviour issues, those students are more likely to engage in school and have fewer aggressive behaviours.

Several studies (Karakas, 2013) indicate that the successful teacher in preventing bullying episodes is a person who is:

- enthusiastic,
- friendly,
- accommodating,
- committed to their students' growth,
- available and easily reachable,
- interested in students as individuals,
- always aware of their status as a role model.

As can be well seen from this list of attributes, a teacher's success in this field is not due to his or her expertise in the particular subject he or she is supposed to teach, but rather to the personal, character qualities that pertain to him or her.

For this crucial reason, the idea of subjecting prospective teachers to real personality tests has taken hold in recent years in some European countries. Summed up briefly, the idea is to investigate whether teachers are suitable people to fill that crucial role in our society, assessing not only their professional skills but also their human (primarily empathic) skills.

#### *Parental and Family Engagement*

The development of a strong anti-cyberbullying culture goes beyond the classroom. The engagement of parents and families with schools has a significant impact on students' social, health, and academic success. Reduced absenteeism, fewer disciplinary actions, and improved social skills can all result from effectively engaging parents and families in their children's school lives.

Parents need to understand that the world their children are living in is completely different from the world they lived in. They need to get involved and be educated about the use of new technologies and the risks they carry for the health of the youngest.

#### *Provide an Education to Feelings*

This aspect is unfortunately one of the most underestimated, but the one that can have the most disruptive impact on creating an anti-bullying culture.

The inclusion within schools of a curriculum aimed at developing the emotional awareness of students is crucial for several reasons. First of all, the knowledge and management of emotional experiences are crucial for psychophysical well-being, and, secondly, this can lead to a better understanding of one's personality and to more effective communication of one's feelings.

The development of these skills could increase and stimulate the manifestation of pro-social behaviours from the group towards “weaker” peers, promoting integration and building a more inclusive environment. Every time the individual becomes aware of his inner state, they know themselves better, since they have the opportunity to get in touch with the most intimate part of themselves. Reflection on one’s own and others’ states of mind also allows increasing empathic capacity, which implies taking on the other’s emotional perspective, that is, the ability to share the same emotions.

The education to feelings is therefore a significant path to better understand themselves and others and can be integrated with the paths of roleplaying, which provides for reflection on both the emotions felt by bullies, victims, or those who witness the bullying, and on the reasons and consequences that these behaviours involve.

### **Addressing (Cyber)-Bullying at School: Who is the Responsible?**

Having dealt in the previous section with some ideas regarding how to build an anti-cyberbullying culture, it is important now to ask who is responsible for the moment we failed to prevent these serious events.

The answer to this question is quite obvious: everyone should address bullying in schools. It takes the entire community to identify the issue, determine how to address it, and take action to stop it. Everyone has a role to play in safeguarding the health and well-being of students.

For that reason, it is important to underline that no group should be held exclusively responsible for stopping bullying. The fight against this serious problem that many students face goes through cooperation between the social groups our students are surrounded by (at the age when they are most exposed to these difficult situations).

When bullying (including cyberbullying) occurs during or after school hours, a parent usually contacts the school first for support. Due to the complicated nature of bullying events, schools will often need to take time to establish a fair and measured decision. This can be unpleasant, but it is critical to ensure that all instances of bullying are handled fairly and with the appropriate consequence.

### **Reporting (Cyber)-Bullying Situation: the Importance of Speaking Out**

It is now necessary to draw attention to another aspect that is fundamental for the fight against bullying, that is to say helping students to take the most important step when they have been victims or witnesses of bullying or cyberbullying: speaking out about it.

Most of the time, the source of our first suffering lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born at the moment when we accumulated silent things

within us. Keeping quiet to keep the peace can be a good thing, but if the peace has already been disturbed, staying quiet will not make anything better. Summoning our courage and speaking up when we need it is always the best decision!

However, because of this happening, our teachers must try to normalize the problem of bullying by emphasizing the importance of reporting incidents as soon as they happen.

If well-trained school staff/teachers/parents could get them to understand how crucial it is to tell about their experiences of (cyber)-bullying immediately after witnessing or being victimized by it – as well as emphasizing that because keeping it hidden will only strongly exacerbate the problem – they would definitely have a huge impact on students' mental and physical well-being, allowing them to get over it quickly and giving them tools to develop powerful antibodies against these types of behaviour.

Indeed, nowadays, one of the roles of schools (and institutions in general) must be to raise awareness among young people about the problem of bullying and cyberbullying through an educational activity that allows them to learn more about the phenomenon, and, as a second step, make them tell their experiences without adopting an inquisitorial tone, as this could frighten students and, consequently, lose the relationship of trust and contact that must be established with them.

In this regard, there are and have been many projects with the aim of preventing (cyber) bullying that, although having a very good scientific basis (involving psychologists and other experts in this area), end up having an approach too formal and bureaucratic, which ultimately turns away young people and does not sensitize them to the problem.

A case study that reports an initiative carried out by an Italian secondary school has been chosen to be presented. It can be considered an example of best practice for the topic addressed in this chapter, both for the effective methodology adopted and for the objectives they aimed to achieve, highlighting the importance of developing a positive relationship between teachers and students, an *education to feelings* able to enhance the empathic feelings and pro-social skills of young people so as to prevent episodes of bullying and cyberbullying, and a good way to spur students to report bullying incidents, making them realize the importance of getting rid of this burden that could jeopardize the course of their entire life.

### **An Example of Best Practice: 100 Stories of Bullying and Cyberbullying**

The work presents a combined work within a single project action an extensive field research activity, a narrative space in which young people have been able to re-elaborate in first person the experiences of bullying and cyberbullying as they have directly encountered in their path of growth, and a training intervention in schools that involved once again young people, but also their teachers.

And it is perhaps “the narrative” the most original contribution of the work; 100 stories of bullying and cyberbullying have been selected by the researchers of EURES (from over 400 collected), for their evocative capacity, for the simplicity and depth of the stories and reflections proposed.

In addition, the problematic issues were identified with precision, the profiles of the actors involved were described, the motivations for their actions, as well as the relationship between these choices and trust in the world of adults and institutions.

The main objective identified by this work is to sensitize students to the importance of telling their experiences of bullying and cyberbullying and not keep them hidden, so as to alleviate their discomfort and ask for help before it can lead to pathological conditions.

Secondary (but no less important) objectives can be listed as follows:

- help develop empathy for those who are being bullied or cyberbullied,
- reflect on personal responsibility on issues of respect, inclusion, or justice,
- dialogue about personal responsibility as actors and as spectators in the face of such situations by connecting to the various themes,
- develop skills of collaboration, self-assertion, and integrity.

The project was structured according to a system articulated in three distinct actions of research and intervention that moving from a phase properly cognitive and measurement of frequency and intensity of the phenomenon among young people of secondary schools, has subsequently enhanced their contribution in terms of reworking experiences and lived, to deposit in an intervention of training and awareness aimed at transferring to young people and the same schools involved, tools for knowledge, awareness, prevention and combat bullying in its various stages, forms, and manifestations.

In detail, the structure of the project was developed along three lines:

- sample survey among upper secondary school students,
- short story among young people in the classes most affected by the phenomenon,
- information, training, and awareness activities on a group of classes with a “high or medium-high” risk of bullying.

With regard to the first action, consisting of a sample survey, researchers have administered a semi-structured questionnaire, to be completed anonymously, aimed at measuring the presence and intensity of the phenomenon of bullying in the main social contexts of reference for young people. The structure and articulation of the data collected through the sample survey have finally allowed, in the statistical processing phase, to create a “synthetic index of bullying risk”.

The second action of the project consisted of the production of a short story by the young people of the selected classes. This story was developed on the basis of an open outline through which young people have reported their experiences as victims, perpetrators, or witnesses of bullying, retracing both the facts and methods

of such humiliating and/or violent manifestations and trying to analyse the “point of view” and the inner situation (psychological, emotional) of those involved, or trying to explain the reason for the behaviour and the roles played by each of them.

An editorial committee, consisting of researchers and psychologists, has read, examined, and evaluated 557 stories, resulting in the selection of the 100 most significant, which were conceptually divided into three chapters on the profiles of “victim”, “author” and “witness” of behaviours related to bullying. The last chapter was in turn divided into two sections, distinguished between witness-participant and witness-narrator (not directly involved or participant in the events narrated).

Finally, the third act of the project was represented by a training intervention within the classes with the highest risk indexes.

It can certainly be useful and important to report one of the 100 stories told by the students, as it allows us to return to the themes previously addressed and then develop a final reflection.

*Title of the story: Elena, struggling with identity theft*

*I was in seventh grade when I found out my photos were out on social media.*

*It was a beautiful day in April when I was told about that. The world fell apart for me; someone had created an Instagram profile with my details and photos and had the bright idea of writing insults under the pictures of other students at the school. I could not believe it.*

*I was targeted by the other students at the school as they believed that it was really me who was insulting them. I was especially targeted by four girls in the corridor at recess; they mocked me because of my appearance.*

*I was afraid to go around the school, so I decided to stay in the classroom. I did not even go out into the garden. I did not say anything to anyone, neither to the teachers nor to my parents... it was the worst choice I could have made.*

*So these two months passed until I started the next school year. The four girls who were insulting me had left but the situation did not improve.*

*More photos were posted, and my classmates continued to make fun of me. By then, I had reached my limit and could not take it anymore.*

*Around May, I decided to be brave and go and report everything to the police. When the teacher told the class, the girl who, according to me, was the author of my nightmare, turned white and felt bad. The next day the profile was deleted. It has now been two years since that day and now that I started high school, I am part of a wonderful class that appreciates me for who I am, even though those images will never be erased from my mind.*

*In the story told by Elena, we find many elements with respect to which this chapter has dwelt. However, what is crucial to pay attention to are two key elements:*

- *the fact that Elena did not immediately tell the story,*
- *the fact that Elena, after finally communicating the story, took charge of her life again, opens a new phase.*

*As widely pointed out, young people who experience bullying or cyberbullying tend not to report the incident immediately but only after their mental situation has worsened and they feel they can no longer bear that burden. This, however, is deeply wrong because it can lead not only to depression but also to self-injurious practices and suicide attempts.*

*We must therefore further emphasize how essential it is to talk about these episodes as soon as possible so that students can put them behind, without having a strong impact on their lives.*

### **Cyberbullying and Criminalization. Italian Context**

As previously described, cyberbullying is a widespread phenomenon with devastating negative social and educational consequences for many young people. As UNICEF points out in its article entitled "Bullying and Cyberbullying", *"bullying and cyberbullying are phenomena that require effective and measured policy intervention precisely because their spread causes such detrimental effects on the learning and behaviour of minors as to reduce the effectiveness of public investment in the education and well-being of children in every country"*.

With this aim, in 2017, Italy became the first European country to introduce a law aimed at combating the phenomenon of cyberbullying and that recognizes, therefore, this phenomenon as a crime.

This law provides, first of all, a definition of cyberbullying by identifying and emphasizing each expression/form that characterizes it and it indicates educational measures for the prevention and contraction of the phenomenon of cyberbullying to be implemented in the school environment and beyond. With this aim, it tends to promote an approach aimed at increasing education and awareness trying to involve in this process not only institutions but also schools and parents. For example, this law requires each school to engage in training for school staff on issues related to cyberbullying prevention, such as legality and informed use of the Internet. In addition to this, each institute must identify among its teachers a school-contact person against cyberbullying who is responsible for coordinating all educational activities aimed at preventing the phenomenon.

Secondly, the law also intervenes outside the school environment, ensuring the application of a specific procedure for the removal of online content harmful to the dignity of the child and extending the application of an administrative sanction introduced in Italy for the crimes of stalking to the phenomenon of cyberbullying. As a result, according to Law n. 71/17 of May 29, 2017, this new procedure allows a minor over the age of 14 who is a victim of cyberbullying (or their parent) to request that the responsible of the website or data owner obscure, remove, or block the harmful content published on the network. In the event that the holder does not provide it within 48 hours, the person concerned may apply to the Italian Data Protection Authority, who will have to intervene within the next 48 hours.

In addition to the introduction of the law against cyberbullying, Italian institutions are approving over the years several regulations, tools, and actions to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying. In addition to the cyberbullying law, Italian institutions have approved several regulations, tools, and actions to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying over the years. To mention a few, the Department of Education has published the following intervention strategies useful for this purpose:

- the publication (with a 2021 update) of the *“Guidelines for the prevention and countering of bullying and cyberbullying”*: the guidelines provide updated tools, e-learning courses, access to new projects, operating procedures, etc. for managers, teachers, and school staff with the specific aim of helping them to combat cyberbullying”.
- the activation of the “ELISA PLATFORM”: the platform provides access to an e-learning path available to managers, teachers, and school staff dedicated to supporting strategies to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying.

As anticipated above, a crucial point of the Italian approach against cyberbullying through the law n. 71/17 of 29/05/2017 foresees that the phenomenon is addressed consistently at the educational level with the aim of carrying out information and prevention events.

With this aim, it is certainly important to dwell on the already mentioned “Guidelines for the prevention and countering of bullying and cyberbullying”: these guidelines, in fact, emphasize the central role of the school in creating a healthy and serene environment to promote the personal growth of students. Therefore, it is a priority to put in place a series of preventive policies and intervention strategies already in place in schools to combat the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

The role of the school in the fight against bullying and cyberbullying is then defined, emphasizing the importance of involving all school stakeholders (teachers, parents, students, and school staff) in this process that is articulated on two levels:

1. *Prevention*:

The guidelines define a series of “Priority” actions that should be implemented by schools in a systematic and continuous way in order to intervene at the root of the phenomenon; in this sense, the 4 priority actions described in the guidelines are:

- Assessment of at-risk students; observation of distress; detection of health-damaging behaviours of boys/girls;
- Training of school staff by participating in the training modules provided by the ELISA platform;
- Training/information activities aimed at teachers, students, families, and ATA staff on the issues of regulations and procedures adopted by the contact person for bullying and cyberbullying and the Antibullying Team;

- Promotion by the teaching staff of an active role of students in preventing and combating bullying and cyberbullying.
- Activation of the “Elisa Platform”.

Prevention activities become, therefore, necessary, and truly important in order to develop a level of responsibility among students at both the school and family levels. These priority actions, in fact, aim to increase awareness of the phenomenon, to engage young people personally in initiatives to raise awareness or to organize events to convey the importance of deepening these issues, etc.

2. *Handling of bullying cases:*

Alongside constant prevention activities, the guidelines also emphasize the need for schools to be able to activate systems for reporting and managing cases of bullying and cyberbullying; Again, in fact, the MIUR (The Ministry of Education, Universities and Research) suggests a few of recommended actions when faced with the manifestation of bullying (or suspicious) actions.

MIUR has also activated a series of important initiatives in recent years to support the school education sector in the prevention of cyberbullying; these include, for example the “A blue knot, campaign for the National Day against Bullying and Cyberbullying at school”, a campaign promoted by MIUR aimed at contrasting the bullying and cyberbullying phenomena. All Italian educational institutions have been called to say “NO” to bullying at school, dedicating the “First National Day against Bullying at School” to awareness actions aimed not only at students but at the whole community.

Remaining in the school education sector, in response to some of the main needs collected at the national level, it is important to focus on the activation by the Ministry of Education of steering committees at the local level, capable of coordinating common actions both in terms of prevention and management of emergencies. With this aim, from 2020 and throughout 2021, two national projects have been activated to promote, through the organization of meetings and training courses, the adoption of a preventive approach to bullying and cyberbullying involving regional and provincial referents for bullying and cyberbullying, teachers, and school managers.

## **Conclusion**

Building a culture against cyberbullying is one of the few means we have to eradicate this harmful problem from our society, ensuring greater mental and physical well-being for our youngest. The six ideas that were presented in the first paragraph can be considered fundamental to the creation of this kind of culture. However, we must not forget that the fight against cyberbullying is part of a medium- to long-term process; consequently, it becomes essential to teach all social groups involved in how to cope with incidents of this kind. Particularly, the focus was placed on one of the most important elements for younger people to return to their lives before the cyberbullying incident: talking about it. While it may seem banal, teaching our children the importance of this first step is one of the crucial

tasks that fall to educators (teachers or parents) if we want to create a society and a community that is based on mutual respect and help.

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CYBERBULLYING AMONG MULTILINGUAL UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS IN ROMANIA.  
BILINGUALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM AS METHODS OF  
PREVENTING IT

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Irina CROITORU

### Introduction

The older generations are more familiar with the notion of *bullying*. Bullying is defined as hostile and derisive behaviour aiming at humiliating another person and making him/her feel bad. Bullying does not involve a conflict based on a real problem, but on the desire of some people to gain power and authority by putting others in a bad light. The phenomenon of bullying can be present in any type of community, in social groups, where people interact with each other: at school, at work, in the family, in neighbourhoods, in the church, in the media, and even between countries. Consequently, a state of conflict is created, which cannot be overcome unless the existence of the phenomenon is realized.

In the 80's and the 90's, the most common form of bullying happened at school or on the playground. Usually, the bullied children were the ones who were called "the teacher's pet", pupils with good school or academic results, but also young people who were part of a minority, for example, the Roma or Hungarian minority, the LGBT minority, or even people that were showing a disability. Other children who were facing this awful attitude were also very slim or plus-size children, children with reduced social interaction or having just a few friends, very rich or very poor children, kids that had other religion, that were too short or too tall, who were pertaining to a different race, who were not doing great in sports, new children in the group or kids that were coming from a divorced family, or just peers who were "different".

The phenomenon was disturbing and unfair, but then, quite nobody was taking the side of the bullied person because they also did not want to become "victims". Not even the teachers, not even the parents got involved. But bullying created trauma, shame, the desire to stay alone and not to mingle in social groups because the bullied kids were afraid of rejection. Counselling was necessary at the time, but nobody was counselling those kids. Going to therapy was something that nobody was doing.

Bullying is an action that produces insults to others carried out repeatedly, which can be manifested physically, through physical aggression, or psychologically, through the production of emotional damage. The instruments of

this phenomenon are words, actions, or social exclusion. The phenomenon of bullying can be initiated by a person or a group of people (mobbing), involving an unequal power relationship, because the victims, in the case of this phenomenon, do not have the resources (physical, psychological, social) to defend themselves. The victim usually assumes a position of vulnerability, revealing certain weaknesses that the bully can exploit. The victim shows the impossibility of defence and feelings of helplessness. Even if they are not directly involved in the bullying phenomenon, observers (bystanders) are nevertheless parties to the behaviour. Bullying is considered a form of physical and psychological violence, an intentional behaviour aimed at causing harm (injury, destruction, damage) to some people (including one's own person), with different causes that determine new forms of violence.

Bullying is already well known, but in the last period, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic years, a new term has grown in importance: cyberbullying. This happened due to the on-line classes. There were countries where the school took place more in an online environment, and others, like Denmark or Norway, where the online classes were reduced to a minimum. Romania was one of the countries where most schools and universities had classes online. As UNICEF data shows, in March 2020, over 150 countries in the world closed their schools, 10 countries partially closed, and other 10 countries kept their schools open. Starting with this moment of the online classes' beginning, many researchers changed their interest main point, focusing on the impact of the online school on students, teachers, and parents (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Letzel et al., 2020; Schleicher, 2020; Helm et al., 2021).

A very clear and helpful definition of cyberbullying is given by Tokunaga in 2010, who defines it as "any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others." (Tokunaga, 2010, p. 278)

Other terms used to describe cyberbullying include cyberharassment, online harassment, electronic bullying, and cybervictimization (Beran et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2014; Fenaughty and Harré, 2013; Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra et al., 2007; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004).

Cyberbullying was considered by Carson & Wilson (2015) to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century health care phenomenon.

Cyberbullying means bullying using digital technologies. It can happen on social networks, messaging platforms, gaming platforms, and mobile phones. It is about repeated behaviour intended to frighten, anger, or humiliate those that are targeted, and the phenomenon is really big today. Examples include:

- spreading lies or posting embarrassing photos of someone on social media,
- sending annoying or threatening messages through messaging platforms,

- copying a person's identity and sending malicious messages to someone on their behalf.

The concept of cyberbullying has been defined in various ways in the literature, for example, as the deliberate and repeated harm inflicted by means of an electronic text or the repeated and intentional use of different forms of technology such as mobile phones, email, instant messaging, or websites by individuals or groups to harm others. Different characteristics are highlighted in different sources, with no consensus on the prevalence of any one of them (Srivastava, 2012).

There is actually some form of power imbalance between the stalker and the victim, for instance in terms of familiarity with the technology used, resulting in an inability to resist. There is a power imbalance between the stalker and the victim, like if the victim is more familiar with the technology used by the stalker. This results in the victim's inability to resist.

Studies on cyberbullying are largely based on the work of John Suler, who investigated a phenomenon he called "toxic disinhibition" in a 2004 article entitled *The Online Disinhibition Effect*. Suler considers that online communication has a disinhibiting effect that can be either positive, leading to "unusual acts of kindness and generosity", or negative, proposing the term *toxic disinhibition* for the latter aspect. (Suler, 2004, p. 321). He identifies six factors involved in the latter:

- dissociative anonymity, "you don't know me"
- invisibility, "you can't see me"
- delayed reactions: "see you later"
- introspection or solipsistic introjection, "it's all in my head"
- dissociative imagination, "this is not real life"

Cyberbullying is a recent form of harassment. In the past, the end of school and the evening were times when the conflicts of the day could be calmed down; now, with the development of social networks, there is no longer any time to rest from conflict. Bullying is no longer confined to the playground, and to times when the child is at school. It is now possible to reach a person at any time. The computer is becoming an outlet for various insults and threats, and a weapon for those who cannot defend themselves physically or socially. More and more teenagers are using these interactions to bully and harass others.

Normative beliefs endorsing bullying influence the incidence of bullying: the more a young person believes that it is easy to bully others, the more he or she will engage in violence through chats, unwanted interventions on social networks, or posting humiliating videos. People have noticed that a young stalker will attack with more force if he or she thinks the victim has little support from his or her peers.

Furthermore, the physical distance from the victim allows for a multiplication of the number of stalkers, their attacks, and the (psychological) strength of their attacks.

- in real interactions it is less important to be stronger, smarter, or more popular than the victim to join a stalking enterprise,
- the abuser does not see the victim's suffering reactions, which short-circuits occasional shifts to compassion and empathy,
- depersonalisation affects not only the victim but also his or her persecutors, who soon take no responsibility for their "virtual" acts.

This depersonalisation leads to a form of paranoia in the victim, who does not know and cannot know who is conspiring in the anonymity of digital channels.

## **Differences from non-virtual harassment**

### ***Anonymity***

Victims of cyberbullying do not always know the identity of their stalkers, who hide behind a pseudonym or false identity to commit their acts, thereby increasing the victim's sense of insecurity, not knowing who is targeting them. However, stalkers do not always hide their identity, and stalking also occurs on platforms where the use of a pseudonym is prohibited.

### ***Lack of face-to-face contact***

As insulting or threatening messages are sent through various digital channels, stalkers and victims do not always meet. The stalker cannot see the pain he or she is causing the victim, as the face is the main mirror of emotions. It is therefore difficult for the stalker to feel empathy for the victim because of the distance created by modern means of communication, which can encourage the trivialisation of violence and the release of certain forms of aggression. However, this aspect must be put into perspective by the fact that harassment also exists in streaming, where the victim's face is visible almost directly.

### ***Trivialization***

Because of its "virtual" aspect, online harassment is often minimised and the consequences for the victim underestimated, which hampers the treatment of victims, who are simply encouraged to stop using the Internet.

### ***Continuous nature***

Messages, photos, and videos posted and exchanged via digital channels leave traces even after a stalking incident has ended. The content posted and remaining online makes it easier to prove the harassment situation.

### ***Massive and instantaneous dissemination***

Humiliating posts on social networks are visible to many Internet users. Whereas bullying was limited to the school walls, now the humiliated victim is visible to all. Internet users can quickly relay the information. Spatial boundaries in this type of harassment no longer exist. This also allows a relatively large number of people to take part in the same harassment situation.

### ***Increased impunity***

Victims of cyberstalking are mostly left without resources. The platforms of the web giants (such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) are regularly criticised for the ineffectiveness of their content moderation tools. Unfortunately, there are consequences. For the victim, for the stalker or for the society witnessing all this. The consequences are poisonous and may last for a very long period. (Nixon, 2014, p.144-148)

### ***Consequences for the victim:***

*In the short term:* Absenteeism (non-attendance at school), Dropping out of school, Psychological unavailability, Feeling of isolation or of abandonment, Loss of employment, Metabolic and behavioural disorders, Various health symptoms, Relational isolation, Withdrawal, feelings of shame, loss of confidence and self-esteem, guilt.

*In the medium term:* Anxiety and depressive disorders (Craig, 1998, p. 124) Self-censorship, Self-destructive behaviour (self-harm, suicidal impulses), Violent behaviour, Use of violence as the only possible means of defence.

*Long-term:* Socialisation disorder, Depression, Addictions (drugs, alcohol, gambling, or other means to distract them but that may have a toxic effect on them), Paranoia, Post-traumatic stress, Risk of being physically assaulted and others.

### ***Consequences for witnesses and the victim's entourage:***

- Abandonment of the victim
- Blaming on the victim, even if the victim is always innocent
- Indirect trauma
- Risk of being targeted in turn
- Violent attitude and distrust of others
- Feeling of insecurity
- Feeling of powerlessness
- Acting out violence
- Feeling of guilt for not having denounced, out of apprehension
- Indirect trauma

### ***Consequences for the stalker:***

*In the short term,* the following can be observed: Lack of empathy, Violence to mask lack of self-confidence, and Repetition of harassment to maintain or regain a sense of power after sanctions.

*In the medium term,* Delinquency and Dropping out of school are possible.

*In the long term,* there may be social exclusion, Violent behaviour manifesting more and more, and even Depression.

### ***Consequences for society:***

- Increased social violence

- Deterioration of interpersonal relationships
- Threat to freedom of expression
- Public health problems
- Rise of exclusionary ideologies

Now, people are gathering signatures online so that any violent message can be instantly reported, and an “anti-bullying” button can be added next to the well-known *like* button.

### **Language barriers**

It is very important to have good knowledge of a language, and the circumstances and the demands of achieving knowledge of a foreign language are of utmost importance. There is a huge difference between the language spoken with friends and neighbours, and the language spoken in school or university. (Bailey & Butler, 2003; Cazden, 2001; Cummins, 1991, 2000)

The language cannot be learnt from a book because it “must be studied in relation to its role in human communication” (Brown, 1986, p. 135). Intercultural communication is very clearly defined by Professor Cucoş C. in his book *Education. Cultural and intercultural dimensions*, as “an exchange or transaction of value accompanied by the understanding of adjacent meanings, between people or groups belonging to different cultures. Exchanges can be made at the idea, verbal, nonverbal, behavioural, physical, objective, organisational level.” (Cucoş, 2000, p 136)

Language barriers may occur between people who do not have the same level of ability in a language (Rani, 2016).

Language barriers that can be encountered are:

- the language level is too low to communicate with others due to a lack of vocabulary
- accent (e.g., it is well known that the Bavarian accent is very difficult to understand even by Germans themselves)
- misusing the words/vocabulary
- not knowing the grammar and spelling: slang words, impolite words
- misinterpretation of the words or expressions (e.g., in German when someone says to you *Du bist blau*, it does not mean that you are coloured blue, but it means that you are drunk)
- incorrect word choice
- use of ambiguous or vague words or phrases

There are also language barriers in the same language:

- Religious Language Differences
- Regional dialects
- No clear speech
- Using taboo words

- Faulty translation of words by using machine translations (e.g., apps like Google Translate, or programs like TRADOS, or different websites like context.reverso.net, linguee.com)

## How to Overcome Language Barriers?

### Bilingualism vs. multilingualism

Many of the students that come to study are bilingual or even multilingual, and this helps them to understand and to integrate more quickly. It is well known the fact that people who know more than one language have a more productive intelligence, have a more flexible cognitive structure and a more productive critical thinking. (Kabadayi, 2008). In general, teenagers who are bilingual or multilingual are more successful, more open to other cultures, and they adapt more quickly than others. They are more tolerant and prepared to listen to each other, as Groux and Krashen state. (Groux, 1996; Krashen, 1997).

A nice clear definition of bilinguals is given by Bloomfield, who defines them as individuals who have “native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 56). A broader definition is given by Grosjean, who defines bilinguals as “those people who need and use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (Grosjean, 2010, p. 4). Two important factors that characterize bilinguals are: language proficiency and language use. (Grosjean 2018).

Dimensions of **bilingualism** were brought into discussion by many researchers, such as Baetans Beardsmore (1986), Hamers and Blanc (1989) etc., but it is important to mention their relation to foreign language learning. As Baetans Beardsmore and Valencia & Cenoz state, there should be a clear distinction between the receptive and the productive bilingualism. A very important dimension to mention is the age of acquisition, or of learning the new language. It is well known that small children learn a language more quickly than adults. Bilingualism can be divided into three categories: a childhood bilingualism, an adolescent bilingualism, and an adult bilingualism. The issue of simultaneous vs. consecutive bilingualism can also be brought up. Simultaneous bilingualism is when someone learns two foreign languages at the same time. Consecutive bilingualism is when the second foreign language is learned after the basis of the first language is understood and acquired (grammar, syntax) (Valencia & Cenoz, 1992, p. 435). Students at UMF Iași can study Romanian and another foreign language (German or Chinese) in a simultaneous or consecutive manner, depending on their time and interests.

Clément (1986) underlines a new dimension of bilingualism, and this is the sociocultural one. In this context, Lambert’s (1974) distinction is highly important to mention: bilingualism can be seen in an additive and subtractive way. In the additive way, the second language is not supposed to produce a negative effect on the “development of cognitive and social skills”. On the other hand, subtractive bilingualism takes place when a minority language is not properly valued by the community. (Valencia & Cenoz, 1992, p. 435)

The sociocultural context is always of high importance, and this includes family members' relationship, educational environment, and geographical context. Most of the time, the mother is the one who initiates education in the family and is also responsible for the initial stages of language learning. The school stage follows the mother stage, and this is when the language begins to acquire a foundation in syntax and grammar. Using two languages starts to have a significant impact on a person's cognitive and social development.

It can be concluded that bilinguals are better language learners, and they achieve a new foreign language more quickly and better. Their academic results are not negatively influenced because of this.

**Multilingualism** arises from the migration phenomenon. The students that speak English and French at the university are bilinguals and some of them even multilingual. College students who speak English and French are bilingual, and some are even multilingual. Here the cultural and educational motivations expand the linguistic area (Edwards, 2013, p. 8).

Multilingualism is seen as extending bilingualism. All countries and societies are considered to be multilingual because there are citizens that are multilingual. (Okal, 2014, p. 223)

The consequences of multilingualism are various: linguistic consequences, development of a *lingua franca*, creation, and growth of it, because of the need for cross-group communication.

Mixed languages will emerge as a result of multilingualism due to intense language contact. For example, the words OK, Internet, cool, WEB, Design are now used in almost all languages; they have become international and used all over the world.

Multilingualism helps us to create the development and acquisition of cross-cultural communication. Flexibility and creativity are developed, and they enhance. Recently, it was discovered that children who grew up in a multilingual environment (speaking more than one language from an early age) are more perceptive and intellectually flexible. (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000).

As the Russian-Ukrainian war has shown us, immigrants become multilingual students, and they should be seen as individuals who store one or more languages at a proficiency level. Teachers should be aware of this and accept and adapt to the fact that multilingual students do not live in a single worldview. These students face diversity, and the teachers should understand that more viewpoints are possible (Cook, 2001).

In 2007, Gorter et al. named some factors that influence multilingualism in society: 1. Historical or political movements (Imperialism, Colonialism, Socialism, Marxism etc.); 2. Economic movements in the case of migration (the Revolution of 1989 in Romania); 3. Increased communication needs between parts of the world, as well as good language skills, in order to improve communication; 4. Socio-cultural identity and the interest in the revival of some minority languages; 5.

Education at all levels; 6. Religion movements that conducted to the movement of people to new places in the world.

If Gorter et al. (2007) saw six factors, Aronin and Singleton (2008) found seven, and Cenoz (2013) concluded that they can be divided into three, namely: geographical, social, and medium. Globalization gave huge importance to the multilingualism. Edwards (2004) said that speaking English is necessary for everyone, but “the ability of speaking other languages none the less ensures a competitive edge” (p. 164). Speaking English helps you all over the world but speaking one or more other languages is an important advantage not only in studying, but also in finding a better job.

As Valencia & Cenoz (1992) considered that bilingualism could be analysed from an additive and a subtractive way, after 20 years, Cenoz (2013) saw multilingualism from the same perspective at the societal level: additive and subtractive.

Multilingualism can also be seen from an individual or societal point of view. If individual multilingualism refers to a personal domain related to the ability to know and use of two or more languages, societal multilingualism refers to the ways, circumstances, causes, contexts, manners, and routines of the people that use the language in various communities, organizations, or groups. Someone can acquire different languages at the same time by being exposed to those from birth or even later in life. The research that has been done until now on the individual multilingualism has focused mainly on the learners’ emotions and attitudes. Most of the research is related to the multilingual experiences and challenges in their life trajectory, and mainly in school life. Most individuals are aware of their behaviour and try to control it. This behaviour is most often associated with habits learned in school or at home, and it varies by nation and country (Cenoz, 2013)

### **Availability of online anti-bullying tools**

On Facebook, there is a set of Community Standards, and on Instagram, there are Community Rules, which our community is asked to abide by. If someone identifies content that violates these policies, such as bullying or harassment, they should delete it. If someone believes that his/her account has been disabled by mistake, he/she also allows for appeals. On Instagram, someone can appeal the deletion of content or account deactivation through the Help Centre. On Facebook there is the same process by visiting the Help Centre.

Each social media platform provides different tools, where someone can restrict the list of people who can leave comments or view posts or who can automatically log in as friends and, therefore, report bullying. Many of these tools involve simple steps such as blocking, hiding, or reporting cyberbullying.

Social networks also provide educational and guidance tools for children, parents, and teachers to learn more about the risks and ways to stay safe online.

In addition, the first line of defence against cyberbullying can be the person himself/herself. People should be thought about where cyberbullying is present in

the community, and the ways in which can help - speak out, expose online bullies, and talk to adults whom they trust, or inform others about it. Even a simple gesture of goodwill can go a long way.

If there is concern for one's safety or for something that has happened to someone online, it is imperative to speak with a reliable adult right away. Many countries have a dedicated helpline where someone can call free of charge and speak to a specialist anonymously. Child Helpline International can also be contacted.

### *How is cyberbullying punished nowadays in Romania?*

Fortunately, things have changed, and now schools treat bullying seriously and act against it. If someone is a victim of cyberbullying by their peers, then it must be reported to the school. People who are victims of any form of violence, including bullying and cyberbullying, must be made to feel safe, and the perpetrator must be held accountable.

Laws on bullying, and especially cyberbullying, are relatively new and have not been adopted everywhere. Because of this, many countries use other laws, like anti-bullying laws, to punish online bullies.

In states that have specific laws to counter cyberbullying, online behaviour that deliberately causes emotional distress is considered criminal activity. In some of these countries, victims of cyberbullying can request protection, a ban on communicating with a specific person, and temporary or permanent restrictions on the use of electronic devices used by that person to bully online. However, it is important to know that punishment is not always the most effective way to change bullies' behaviour. It is often better to try to remedy the harm caused and improve the relationship.

## **Conclusion**

If older generations were bullied without exactly knowing what that was, the new generations that are bullied and cyberbullied now have a set of means to control this unfair phenomenon. It may happen to everybody, and we should not forget it may happen to our children. From filing or submitting a complaint to the police to seeking help or speaking with a therapist, the new era begins with several options for keeping this phenomenon as far away as possible. Maybe it cannot be stopped, but, as shown in the present paper, it can be controlled.

Bilingualism and multilingualism broaden our horizons and keep languages alive. On the other hand, knowing a language or more languages always help to prevent bullying and cyberbullying. The more languages someone knows, the better their level of understanding is, and the higher their level of self-protection against bullying and cyberbullying is.

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**SOCIAL, ECONOMIC  
AND LEGAL CONTEXTS**



## THE ART OF AGGRESSION

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Cezarina Florina CALOIAN

### Introduction

In its usual sense, the term *bullying* refers to certain forms of aggression and harassment, involving, in fact, an unbalanced power relationship between individuals or groups. Based on intimidation and repetitive aggressive behaviour, the term *bullying* is mostly associated with relationships between children and adolescents, in a real or virtual environment (*cyber-bullying*) but can be found in all social contexts. Generally speaking, it involves an imbalance of physical power or social status and access to some embarrassing information, which is used to discredit and control. The phenomenon has three fundamental characteristics: it is deliberate, repeated, and it involves an unfair relationship of forces (power); the behaviour is hostile, exclusionary, and intimidating, brutalizing and terrorizing. Having no real social problem at its basis, *bullying* is rooted in some people's or groups' desire to gain and/or consolidate their power. This phenomenon uses verbal tools, which may include denigration or propaganda campaigns, acts of public humiliation or social exclusion, with negative effects in the short or long term. The person's or group's inability to defend themselves – because of the unequal power relationship between the victim and the aggressor – creates feelings of helplessness and social isolation, which may sometimes lead to suicide. In this brief description of *bullying* we cannot fail to mention the passive involvement of spectators (*bystanders*), those who observe, are aware of the offensive or intimidating actions, but do not interfere out of fear, indifference, or convenience. As a rule, the aggressor lacks empathy, and is domineering, while the victim is physically, emotionally – or socially vulnerable, we could add, precisely because this phenomenon can take place on a much larger scale, as we will show in this paper, based on differences of race, ethnicity, or religion. Also called *social bullying*, this phenomenon refers to actions aimed at damaging reputation or status, with the aim of excluding and isolating individuals or groups socially and/or professionally.

Extrapolating to the artistic field, we will try to delimit and emphasize certain features of this social phenomenon frequently encountered in everyday life and in the field of visual arts, because art has always been associated with power. According to the definition, “a social actor's power can be defined as the ability to make things happen” (Avery, *apud.* Marius Milcu, 1999). On the one hand, the artist-creator has been seen as a “super-human”, able to create, to give life to original objects and images, which transmit and express ideas and phenomena that

are sometimes untranslatable. The artistic object turns ideas and emotions into a visual form; it relies on expressiveness, and it requires contemplation and the ability to understand and decrypt the visual message. It has even been used during armed conflicts as a means of documentation, but also to influence people.

Throughout the ages, the power exerted by art on the masses or on groups of individuals has also been used in order to influence or to present dramatic actions to the general public by associating them with intense images. For example, emphasizing fear/terror, the painting signed by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya in 1814, entitled *The Third of May 1808*, depicts Napoleon's army invading the city of Medina del Rio Seco, which resulted in 3,500 Spaniards losing their lives.



Francisco Goya – *The Third of May 1808*, oil on canvas, 1814,  
Prado Museum, Madrid.

As we see today, the impact of images is much stronger than that of words, and Richard Reitzell delineates certain directions in art which were actually in the service of *power* (Reitzell, 2018). *The power of the cross* dominated European art for two millennia, through the greatness of cathedrals or the “allegorical lessons” or parables from the Bible present in every art field. *The power of the crown*, presented only in portraiture until the Renaissance, dominated from two perspectives: on the one hand, royal dynasties patronized artists and possessed impressive collections (see Napoleon Bonaparte’s art collection, which laid the foundation of the Louvre Museum in Paris), and, on the other hand, these works of art presented to the world

the important events in the life of kings and emperors (coronations, royal weddings, armed victories, etc.). A brief review of the portraits of European monarchs shows that they were always strong and fearless, and the artist distorted reality in some cases. *The power of patriotism* – the unifier of various social categories – has been personified in numerous works of art, of which the best known is *Liberty leading the people* by Eugène Delacroix. Imagination or *an image's power to deceive*, to arouse curiosity, as Richard Reitzell puts it, is found mainly in the works of the surrealists and other twentieth-century avant-garde artists. But most powerful of all is *an image's power (impact)* on the human senses.

Intimidation, harassment, or manipulation through art involve a power relationship, and the object of our study is to try and detect certain moments or methods by which art has become a channel used to humiliate or publicly discredit artists or individuals belonging to certain ethnic or racial groups. There are also other aspects that involve *bullying*: the artist's exposure and public lynching, frequently encountered today, through social media; their physical and emotional vulnerability in front of the public, as we will see by analysing certain performances by artist Marina Abramović; or the simple and fundamental right to free speech that harms beliefs and credos and that can lead to terrible acts of terrorism (*Charlie Hebdo* magazine). An unavoidable question arises: *where does our right to free speech end and how far can we stretch it?*

The most visible and influential historical periods in which art became a means of harassment, defamation and even public humiliation are the Nazi period in Europe and the one in which racial segregation reached its peak in the United States after the abolition of slavery. In these two periods, the image of the Jew and of the black person was represented in the most terrible ways; the people belonging to the two categories were systematically dehumanized and publicly discredited. "One constant of the white man's civilising mission has always been a merciless portrayal of the African, not only in narrative and in painting, but also in scientific texts" (Eco, 2007).

In the Nazi view, the Jew was "a destroyer of culture, a parasite, devoid of idealism" (Guyot, Restellini, 2002) but until the twentieth century, we notice that religious anti-Semitism materialized into the medieval pogrom that happened during the Crusades, "an ethnic anti-Semitism that was established in Europe after the Diaspora and, even more so, after the Jews were expelled from Spain when the Moors were finally driven out in 1492" (Eco, 2007), doubled by the one sketched by Luther in *On the Jews and their lies*, in 1543. Shakespeare himself was anti-Semitic in his famous play *The Merchant of Venice*.

Old themes are repeated, such as usury or ritual murder, and the population is indoctrinated through images in which the Jew is represented as a devil, Bolshevik revolutionary, leader of various capitalist financial organizations, whose sole purpose is to destroy the German people. These representations appear on postcards, posters, but also in film productions whose main goal is to stigmatize the Jew.



Gino Boccasile – Anti-Semitic Fascist Propaganda Postcard, 1943-1944.



Anti-Semitic poster promoted by Nazi propaganda.

However, anti-Semitism reached its heyday during the Nazi period, a political regime that managed not only to marginalize and destroy the Jewish population in this part of Europe but also to “stage the burning of books and ideas” (Guyot, Restellini, 2002) in a total show, to the audience’s delirious cheers. Thus, Joseph Goebbels, the great Nazi propagandist, organized a ceremony for the burning of “materialistic and falsifying” books, on May 1, 1933, as an act “against decadence and moral corruption, for decency and morality in family and state” (apud. Guyot, Restellini, 2002). The works of Heinrich Mann, Ernst Gläser, Marx, Sigmund Freud, Erich Maria Remarque, and others were destroyed by “purifying fire”. Goebbels’ genius in terms of slogans and his power of persuasion were to be greatly enhanced by the position he held, from March 13, 1933, as head of the Ministry of Public Information and Propaganda, through which he staged true rituals to “exorcise the enemy”. In the golden age of German Nazism, Hitler’s dream of creating “the new man, based on the purity of Aryan blood, without the distorted elements of Jewishness” (Guyot, Restellini, 2002) was supported by all state institutions, including the press and the church, and his ideas infiltrated all artistic and cultural fields. Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*: “the art of propaganda is to be able to stir up public imagination, appealing to people’s feelings, finding the right psychological formulas to attract the attention of the masses and go straight to the soul” (apud. Guyot, Restellini, 2002) and Joseph Goebbels managed to turn it into a true art, addressing all the senses, and especially human sensitivity, through extraordinary staging and directing. The latter was also involved in the cultural field, being fully aware of the impact of artistic acts on the receiving audience.

Literature, theatre, the visual arts, and the cinema were subjugated by the ideas of Nazi leaders, and artists and writers needed to register with the Chamber of Culture in order to work. J. Goebbels' attention focuses mainly on cinema, much more popular and influential with the masses, capitalizing on the power of the moving image to act on the feelings of the viewer, feelings that are not related to rational thinking, but to emotions. The leader is given a Christ-like role and his public speeches are staged like true screenplays: his entrance on stage coincided with sunrise or took place at dusk to achieve an effective dramatic effect by casting all spotlights on him (Guyot, Restellini, 2002).

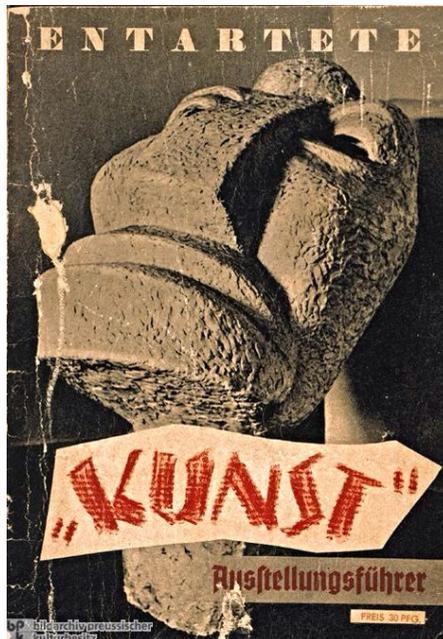
The attention of Goebbels and the ministry he was running focused on intellectuals, university professors, and artists: courses and artistic performances were discontinued or cancelled for no reason. Blacklists are compiled and published of artists and writers (Tuchovsky, Brecht, Grosz, Kandinsky or Ossietzky) whose works are removed from museums or libraries. Those who worked in film or music did not escape public disgrace either: Pudovkin, Eisenstein, or composers Stravinsky or Hindemith, were not spared by Nazi rage. Self-censorship due to the Nazi terror became stronger and more effective than censorship, we would say. Experimental plays, such as "St. John the Baptist" written by playwright Bertold Brecht, are not staged for fear of upsetting the Nazi regime. This situation brings to mind the condition of the great Romanian man of culture and playwright Mihail Sebastian, who, due to his Jewish origins, was removed from cultural life and ended up publishing under the pseudonym Victor Mincu in order to see his plays staged.

Famous cultural personalities become the target of arrests and purges: Ossietzky and Ludwig Renn are arrested and deported, the painter George Grosz is already abroad, Thomas Mann, Marlene Dietrich, Steinberg prefer to self-exile. All prominent figures of Jewish origin and defenders of liberal, communist, or even pacifist ideas become sure victims of the totalitarian regime. The great German expressionist artist Käthe Kollwitz leaves the Prussian Academy, together with Heinrich Mann and the architect Martin Wagner, to save the institution from dissolution. From March 1933, book-burning actions are organized in all German cities to gain "complete mastery of German thought and culture" (Guyot, Restellini, 2002) and they take place accompanied by fanfare and chants of exorcism in front of enthusiastic audiences. The works of the great thinker Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology, considered "unworthy and against the German spirit" are being destroyed by the flames of totalitarian Nazi hysteria. Thus, more than 20,000 volumes are destroyed in the Berlin Opera House alone, and the propaganda's attention is turned to "degenerate" modern art. German National Socialism does not tolerate any modern artistic trend, "hates futuristic or cubist nonsense, and Dadaism, seen as the extravagance of some crazy and degenerate people" (Guyot, Restellini, 2002), proposing instead themes such as country life and motherhood. Rather surprising is the contempt shown for the emancipation of women, the interdiction to hold a public position up to the age of 35, the elimination of married

women from the industry or the reduction of the number of those who could be active in the medical field. Birth rates are encouraged, and unmarried or childless women are marginalized. The reconsideration of out-of-home work will only be possible after 1935, when the number of men enlisted in the army grows higher and higher, and women are reintegrated into the labour market.

The measures meant to harass and intimidate become more and more overwhelming for all intellectuals and artists who refuse to portray a reality distorted by propaganda. The goal of National Socialist ideology was to destroy critical sense and individual thinking, creativity and originality, and artists either lose their jobs (Otto Dix), go back to their countries of origin, or simply emigrate (Paul Klee, Kandinsky).

The denigration and public humiliation of artists culminates in the exhibition *Degenerate Art* organized in 1935 in Nuremberg and later moved to all major German cities. Numerous works by Kirchner, Nolde or Schmidt-Rottluff Müller, Beckman, Oscar Kokoschka, Chagall, Franz Marc, Kandinsky, Paul Klee, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and others are on public display. Launched officially in the presence of Hitler and Goebbels, this event was accompanied by a catalogue in which the works of art were grouped into different categories: *Displays of Jewish racist art, The Invasion of Bolshevism in art, Insults to German womanhood, Outrage against heroes, German peasants seen by Jews, Madness turned into method or Nature seen by sick minds.*



Poster of the *Degenerate Art* Exhibition, 1935, Nuremberg.

After 1936, all expressionist art displays are banned, artists become inactive, some leave, others remain to live in unimaginable conditions, or are simply crushed by the propaganda machine (Kirchner, for example, commits suicide). In 1939, Otto Dix is arrested for his membership in the “League for Human Rights”, his work is banned from museums and galleries, and Paul Klee, Kokoschka and Emil Nolde are permanently attacked by the press. The latter is called a “Negroid painter”, like Kichner, and their works will also be banned from public display.

Works of art signed by Picasso, Chagall, Gauguin, Matisse, Braque, Van Gogh, Klee or Kandinsky – actually, all avant-garde art pieces – are removed from art museums, and they end up either in Joseph Goebbels private art collection, sold to foreign museums, or simply destroyed by burning. Through its systematic actions of denial and destruction, the Nazi system acted not only on the Jewish culture and people, but also on the entire European system of values, on universal art and culture. In the run-up to World War II, the services of the Ministry of Propaganda destroyed 4,892 paintings, watercolours pieces, and sculptures.

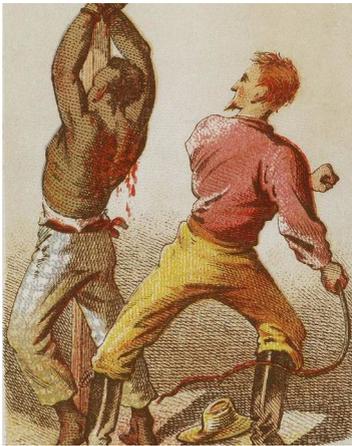
Because, at the beginning of this paper, we mentioned the passive participation of bystanders, those who observe the harassment, humiliation and destruction of some people and their work, we can emphasize that all these forms of repeated pressure and oppression aimed at avant-garde artists happened with the acceptance of an important category of intellectuals and people of culture of that time, who supported the dictatorship but also this *bullying*, as we might call it today, out of opportunism, naivety, or even indifference. The same can be said of the international public opinion, which either did not fully understand the seriousness of the phenomenon or was not vigilant enough.

Marius Milcu describes a certain typology of power: that of *reward*, by receiving undue benefits, *the power of coercion*, by applying sanctions in case of disobedience, *legitimate power* (between a superior and a subordinate, based on consensus), *the power of reference* (valuing the strong, based on admiration), *the power of competence* (based on expertise in a certain field), *the power of information* (also related to expertise) and *the power composed* of several types of power listed above. Returning to Nazi repression, we can say that it was based on the first three types of power, as it amplified its ability to influence the public through manipulation, fear, and terror. Its only skills were those involved in building and maintaining an extremely effective propaganda system.

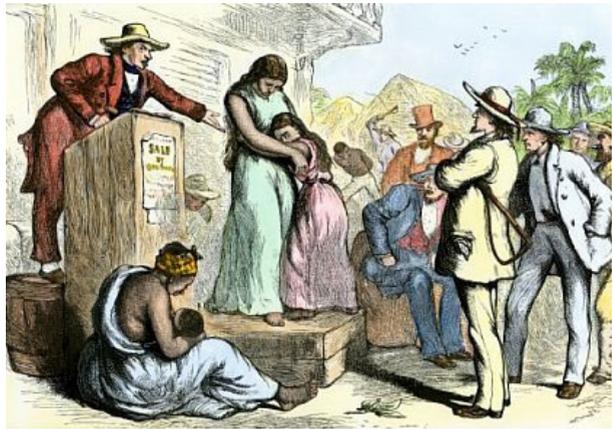
An exhibition on the theme of *The Eternal Jew* was organized in Munich in 1937. After 1939 it became a travelling exhibition to other communist countries, and in 1940 it was presented to the general public through the big screen. This event, organized meticulously by Nazi propaganda, was intended to be one steeped in science, because it presented photographs, statistics and graphs meant to inform the public about the danger posed by *the Jew*. All this masquerade on so-called scientific grounds was aimed at convincing the public that radical measures were imminent and welcome. An example was the great *Kristallnacht* pogrom of

November 9, 1938, which worked as a prelude to the mass extermination camps that the Nazis put into use in 1942.

The Nazi regime and the Holocaust are one of the most heinous moments and events in the history of mankind, along with the implementation of slavery and racism. The white man's supremacy and the colonization of distant territories brought about derailments from the naturalness of things, through the development of slave trade, another black spot in the history of mankind. According to documents, the beginnings of slavery coincided with the moment when 20 slaves of African descent were brought, aboard a Dutch merchant ship, to the port of Jamestown, Virginia, on August 20, 1619. Since then until 1865, when Slavery was abolished, there passed two and a half centuries in which black people were deprived of their most basic rights. Although the *Declaration of Independence* of 1776 stated that all people are born equal, slavery remained valid in all the former British colonies for almost another century (Danilov, 2022). The Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1793 described black people as follows: "Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principles of natural law and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself" (apud Eco, Umberto, 2007).



A postcard illustrating the punishments for slaves in the United States.



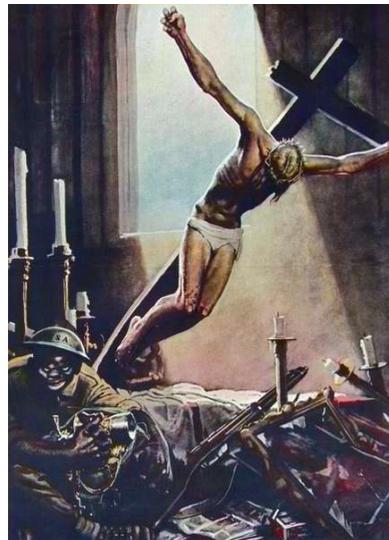
*Mother and daughter sold at a slave auction,* hand-coloured woodcut, 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Slavery, racial segregation, and racism can also be easily identified in art by looking at the representations of the condition of black people in the American society. On the one hand, these printed illustrations and engravings were intended to intimidate but also to inform black people about the punishments they could

face in case of disobedience; on the other hand, they were a sort of x-ray of those times in which slavery was a natural reality. After the abolition of slavery, racial segregation remained a major problem for the black population, and racist representations – an everyday reality. Paradoxically, for the Nazi and Soviet propaganda machine, the black man becomes a symbol of the oppression perpetrated by the American capitalist system. Thus, the black man represented on American posters as a wild animal kept in chains in order to be tamed is portrayed by European fascist or communist propaganda as an unscrupulous character lacking in moral and spiritual values. An eloquent example is the artistic creation of Gino Boccasile, a creator of fascist propaganda images during the Musollini regime in Italy.



Gino Boccasile – Black American robbing a church, anti-American poster by Italian fascist propaganda, 1943.



Gino Boccasile – Illustrated book of Anti-American Propaganda by the Italian Social Republic, 1943- 1944.

Caricature – that form of the comic present in virtual spaces or in the written press -, aims “at highlighting physical or intellectual features or behaviour patterns that make the character likeable” (Eco, Umberto, 2007). Also called the opposite of idealization, caricature simplifies or exaggerates some traits strategically, revealing generous details (de Botton, Armstrong, 2018). There are situations in which the caricatured is systematically humiliated and caricature becomes a kind of political weapon, but also circumstances in which the right to free speech is not fully understood or accepted. The terrorist attack on the editorial staff of the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* that took place in 2015, following their publication of some cartoons with the Prophet Muhammad, terrified the whole world but also brought into question the limits of the right to free speech and whether the reception of

this comic art form depends on the degree of the receiving public's malleability of thinking.

The last situation we want to discuss, in which art or the artistic act become a channel or an opportunity to harass, humiliate or terrorize a target audience or its creator, is a performance entitled *Rhythm 0* and staged by artist Marina Abramović in a gallery in Naples in 1974. The public is given total freedom over the artist's body and is offered 7 hours and 72 very diverse objects to use: a hammer, a feather, a saw, a fork, perfume, lipstick, sugar, etc., but also a gun and a bullet. During the first three hours, the large crowd gathered does almost nothing, and then the behaviour of the audience starts to take a strange turn: one man cut her shirt with scissors and undresses her, another wrote the word "end" with lipstick on her forehead, a couple walked her around the room and then laid her on the table, spread her legs, and thrust a knife very close to her genitals, someone stuck safety pins on her body, while another used a knife to make a small incision on her neck and sucked her blood. The climax was a man's decision to load the gun and put it against the artist's neck. According to Marina Abramović, the very presence of this character – very small, breathing weirdly near her throughout the performance, was an element of stress. He pulled the trigger, and at that point, frightened, the audience intervened and removed him from the gallery (Abramović, 2019). The performance ended after 7 exhausting hours for the artist, who had nevertheless taken responsibility for any event or action that might have happened during the act, and the challenge was just as great. The next day, the audience members who had assisted to the performance on the previous evening called the gallery to express their regrets about their behaviour, but the artistic act proposed and produced by Marina Abramović brought into question not only her own fears (fear of suffering and death) and their overcoming with the help of the public, but also the boundaries of the latter when the artist is permissive and does not restrict their actions. As it was not a repetitive performance, we cannot say that it is a form of *bullying* directed at the artist, but during the 7 hours of the performance, a part of the public hurt and humiliated her precisely because the balance of power tilted in their favour.

## Conclusions

The enumeration of these events or strategies used to humiliate, harass and terrorize a particular person or group of individuals, on ethnic, racial or religious grounds, or simply out of a desire to strengthen an unfair power relationship, inevitably leads us to the question of *whether art can be used as a channel of defamation or destruction or if it can be a form of bullying*. Undoubtedly, the manipulation of artistic acts and the distortion of their meaning can lead to bizarre directions, in opposition to the primary purpose of art, that of creating beauty and transmitting emotions, or simply to x-ray the world, revealing sensibilities and vulnerabilities.

For centuries, art has been monopolized by the powerful – and we refer here to political, social, or religious power – and the directions in which it has gone or the truths revealed have been dictated by those in power. In human history, totalitarian systems – the Nazi system or the communist system that suffocated half of the European continent for more than half a century – have made use of intellectual terrorism, destroying true cultural values by imposing and promoting a type of art accessible to all. Elitist ideas and originality were discouraged, in favour of representations framed in figurative realism, with the political leader or the “new man” at their centre as a result of the implementation of diseased social and political systems. Today, *power* seems to be in the hands of social media, which, in addition to the fast spreading of information, also allow the dissemination of false information or uninformed opinions, favouring the promotion of *bullying* attitudes.

To quote Prince Mishkin, a character in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* who says that “beauty will save the world”, we put our hope in the individual’s ability to discern between good and evil, to build a just and balanced society based on democratic values, centred on education and culture, the two fundamental components without which human society cannot develop.

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# CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF THE CYBERBULLYING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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## **Introduction**

Human society has been and will be clearly dependent on technology (Ferkiss, 1969; Magee and Devezas, 2011), starting with the apple given to Adam by Eve and ending with our journeys in our solar system, and especially to Mars. Thus, in the last 10,000-12,000 years, technology has represented an essential parameter of the evolution of human society, which is part of the evolutionary spiral of progress (Tugui, 2009). The specific literature analyses the contribution of technology to our modern world and even insists on technological calmness or non-calmness (Weiser, 1995; Tugui, 2004) upon man, society, and the environment. This has explicitly led to concepts such as calm technology, green technology, and environmental technology, with effects regarding the creation of a sustainable economy oriented towards the seventeen sustainable development goals (United Nation, 2022), namely: 1: No Poverty, 2: Zero Hunger, 3: Good Health and Well-being, 4: Quality Education, 5: Gender Equality, 6: Clean Water and Sanitation, 7: Affordable and Clean Energy, 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 10: Reduced Inequality, 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities, 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, 13: Climate Action, 14: Life Below Water, 15: Life on Land, 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, 17: Partnerships for the Goals. Of course, all these goals relate to the global phenomenon of digital transformation, which influences all aspects of our everyday lives.

It is important to understand that digital transformation represents an essential part of the technological society (Ellul, 1964) as an effect of technological changes (Wienclaw, 2014), and an important step towards what will be technological singularity (Vinge, 1993; Kurzweil, 2005). Even if Boulton (2021) centres the discussion on digital transformation at an organizational level, it needs to be reviewed at a societal level, as suggested by Excell and Earnshaw (2015). Basically, the digital transformation of the society represents a rethinking and a reorganization (Boulton, 2021) of the ways of organizing economic and social life

as a whole as a result of the expected interaction between man and technology throughout the manifestation of the processes in which it refers to.

Primarily, societal transformation implies change, which for the society that we live in, it was not, is not, and will not be something new (Taylor, 1977). Even in ancient times, the Chinese accepted the idea of continuous change, having guidelines for change in this regard (Bau, 2012). Thus, we have to face the everyday life technological paradox (Tugui, 2009), in which man is both slave and master of technology and in which it is necessary to follow societal rules and norms. In this respect, a lot of attention has been given to the issue of cybercrimes, among which a special place is occupied by bullying in the online environment, also known as cyberbullying (Donnelly, 2014). Of course, through digital technology, solutions to this new technological challenge are also being sought, by using applications of artificial intelligence (AI) to prevent, identify, limit and/or avoid cyberbullying in smart societies (Ciaburro, Iannace and Puyana-Romero, 2022; Al-Marghilani, 2022; Shakeel and Dwivedi, 2023).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical overview of cyberbullying, focusing on the main aspects related to its manifestation, with the clear intention of identifying the main challenges for society from this perspective.

## **Bullying and Cyberbullying**

### *From mobbing toward bullying*

From a technological point of view, today's society is the manifestation of what we call *cyberspace*, where everything is constantly changing. This has led to the current rethinking of societal paradigms through *digital transformation* as a result of the integration of the fourth factor of production (information) in the so-called neweconomy or digitaleconomy. As expected, the new economy brings along new challenges for people in their interaction with technology and with other people, including bullying that cannot be detached from human communities.

As can be easily seen, the term *bullying* has its origin in the English verb "to bully", which means "to frighten or hurt a weaker person; to use your strength or power to make somebody do something" (Oxford Learners' Dictionary). Even if at the present moment it means negative behaviour, the researchers (Bucur *et al.*, 2020) highlighted the fact that in the 16th century it had a completely opposite meaning, as of *beloved* or *my dear*, apparently having its source in the Danish word *boele*.

It is important to highlight the fact that bullying has accompanied human civilization in its evolution (Munteanu, n.d.), regardless of the moment we are referring to, i.e., whether we are talking about pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial society (Lenski, 1966), or we are discussing the stone or the stick in the first hominid groups, or the computer or the today's telephone. All this has made bullying a ubiquitous phenomenon in different forms in human society (Laffan *et*

al., 2022). The difference between these reference moments is represented by the instruments.

According to the specialized literature, Dan Olweus is considered to be the first author on this subject of bullying in his work "*Hackkycklingar och översittare: Forskning om skolmobning. Stockholm*" published in Stockholm in 1973. The same book was translated into English in Washington, five years later, (Olweus, 2017) with the title "*Aggression in the schools. Bullies and whipping boys*". As Olweus (2017) explains, the term *bullying* was not used in the initial version, but as it can be understood from the title, the term *mobbing* was used. The possibility to replace the original term came after 1978 when it fitted better with the terminology in the English language. Initially, Olweus (1993) considered bullying as a form of intentional aggression towards a less powerful person and which was carried out with a certain rhythmicity-repetitiveness, defining it as follows: "*A child is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other children*" (Olweus, 1993, p 9). However, Lund, Helgeland and Kovac (2015) highlighted an earlier definition of the term than that of Olweus, given by the Australians Rigby and Slee (1991), by which bullying was considered an "*oppression directed by more powerful persons or by a group of persons against individuals, who cannot adequately defend themselves*" (p. 617).

However, basically, Olweus (2013) considers bullying to be "*a subset of aggressive behaviour*", which is manifested by repeatedly causing discomfort to another person. From his definition, Olweus (2013) systematizes the criteria of *intentionality*, *some repetitiveness* and of *imbalance of power* with which the researchers and the practitioners qualify the specific behaviour of bullying.

As a phenomenon and a process, bullying manifests itself in those places where there is stronger socialization between people, such as kindergarten, school, workplace, places of detention etc. However, according to the literature (Due *et al.*, 2005), the basic idea that emerges is that bullying was, is and will be a big problem in schools. In these circumstances, there is almost no person who has not been, at different moments of their lives, in one of the three roles defined by Smith and Sharp (1994) within a cycle of bullying manifestation: either a bully or a victim or a bystander. Regarding school, Knight *et al.* (2011) include bullying on a list of common existing and recurring concepts used in school violence research, namely: aggressiveness, bullying, direct/indirect violence, physical violence, verbal violence, harassment, relational violence, cyber violence, and sexual violence. When referring to the forms of manifestation of bullying, Cantone *et al.* (2015) summarize: "*physical (punching or kicking, seizing or damaging other people's belongings); verbal (ridiculous, insulting, repeatedly mocking someone, making racist remarks); relational (leaving one or more peers out of aggregation groups) and indirect (spreading rumors or gossip about a student)*" p. 58.

Regarding the consequences of bullying as a societal process, Olweus (1993), Rutter (1997), Roland (2002) and Lien and Welander-Vatn (2013) clearly highlighted the unfavourable impact on society, the individual and the individuals involved in

the process of bullying from a social, emotional, and well-being point of view, insisting on its manifestations such as depression, withdrawn, less prosocial behaviour, anxiety, and low self-confidence, including suicide.

The widespread use of the Internet, phones, tablets, and laptops has led to the expansion of communication and the virtual shift of many processes in everyday life. Once this digital conversion of human interaction occurred, it implicitly resulted in the transfer of some forms of bullying manifestation to these environments of interaction, as well as the implicit transition from face-to-face action/actions to online action/actions, which resulted in cyberbullying (CBB).

### *The cyberbullying in current society*

The direct consequence of the assimilation of information (information technology) as a production factor of the new economy, the creation of cyberspace through the digital transformation of society as a whole, led to the expansion of bullying in what we call today Cyberbullying. Thus, in its most direct form, CBB is considered to be bullying using technology such as the Internet and mobile phones (Menesini *et al.*, 2012; Smith *et al.*, 2008). According to Perren *et al.*'s analysis (2012), there is clearly a significant conceptual and practical overlap between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, in the sense that many young people who have been victims of cyberbullying will also find themselves in the situation of victims of traditional bullying.

Regarding the forms of CBB manifestations, Cantone *et al.* (2015), referring to Menesini and Nocentini (2009), systematize the following: **flaming** (online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language); **harassment** (repeatedly sending mean, insulting messages); **cyberstalking** (repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear); **denigration** (spreading rumours online; sending or posting gossip about a person to damage his/her reputation or friendships); **impersonation** (pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger, or damage that person's reputation or friendships); **outing** (sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online); **trickery** (tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online); and **exclusion** (intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group). (p. 58)

In its turn, Donnelly (2014) defines CBB as an activity in which an individual or a group of individuals is "*targeted for insulting, offensive, or threatening messages sent through internet enabled equipment such as computers or handheld devices like mobile phones or tablets*" (p. 67). In this context, CBB can be considered "*as the extension of physical bullying in cyberspace*" (p. 67). In other words, CBB is characterized by the fact that the aggressor uses various forms of electronic contact (Cantone *et al.*, 2015) in order to intensify his actions of discomfort addressed to the victim without identifying himself (being anonymous).

In everyday cyberspace, there are major companies that support society by offering solutions in terms of limiting aggressive behaviours in the online environment, especially for children. This is also the case of the *Kaspersky* company that developed the “Kids safety by Kasperski” program (10 Forms of Cyberbullying, 2022) through which it supports comfort and interaction without the risk of aggressive behaviour when referring to the following ten types of Cyberbullying:

1. Exclusion “*is the deliberate act of leaving you out*” (par. 1), which means that a certain person will be excluded from a group;
2. Harassment “is a sustained, constant and intentional form of bullying comprising abusive or threatening messages sent to your child or to a group.” (par. 2);
3. Outing “is a deliberate act to embarrass or publicly humiliate your child or a group through the online posting of sensitive, private or embarrassing information without their consent.” (par. 3)
4. Cyberstalking. “This form of cyberbullying can extend to the cyberbully making real threats to your child’s physical wellbeing and/or safety. Cyberstalking can also refer to the practice of adults using the Internet to contact and attempt to meet with young people for sexual purposes.” (par. 4)
5. Fraping “is when somebody logs into your social networking account and impersonates your child by posting inappropriate content in their name.” (par. 5)
6. Fake Profiles “can be created in order for a person to hide their real identity with the intention of cyberbullying your child.” (par. 6)
7. Dissing “is the act of sending or posting cruel information about your child online, to damage their reputation or friendships with others.” (par. 7)
8. Trickery “is the act of gaining your child’s trust so that they reveal secrets or embarrassing information that the cyberbully then shares publicly online.” (par. 8)
9. Trolling “is the deliberate act of provoking a response through the use of insults or bad language on online forums and social networking sites.” (par. 9)
10. Catfishing “is when another person steals your child’s online identity, usually photos, and re-creates social networking profiles for deceptive purposes.” (par. 10)

In a broader attempt to systematize the specialized literature, Klettke, Howard and Clancy (2020) identify sixteen types of CBB, of which 8 (eight) are different from those detailed above, namely:

- visual aggression – posting and dissemination of harmful visual material;
- slamming – refers to a situation in which bystanders join the bully in teasing or harassing the targeted person;
- masquerading/impersonation – assuming someone else’s identity or pretending to be someone else online in order to harass a targeted person, to ruin that person’s reputation or relationships, or to get the person in trouble;

phishing – attempting to obtain sensitive personal information, such as bank account or passwords, by pretending to be a trustworthy entity, a website you are familiar with, or a person you interact by phone, text messages or online;

rattling – pertains to controlling someone’s computer or webcam without their permission or knowledge;

flooding – an act of sending many lines of text to the victim to flood their screen with text;

sex dissemination – purposeful and non-consensual distribution of sexts (sexually explicit messages, images, and videos);

griefing –in online games, pertains to the acts of aggression and violence through hate-speech, killing a team member, virtual rape, or stealing virtual money or items. (pp. 11-12 extract)

From a theoretical perspective, we can talk about cyberbullying on several levels, namely: what it represents, how and where it manifests itself, in what forms, what the consequences are, what ways of identifying, limiting, and avoiding it we can have in the current digital transformation of society. We believe that the consequences for the victims, bullies, and bystanders are of particular importance in the economy of this existential path of cyberbullying. Thus, in this endeavour, a very helpful approach is Olweus’s definition (1993), that bullying is in fact aggressive behaviour, as well as framing cyberbullying as an extension of physical bullying in cyberspace (Donnelly, 2014).

Regarding the aggressor, in agreement with Huesmann (2017), since it is about aggressive behaviour, two categories of influences on him/her are considered:

*First, all biological factors exert their influence on social behaviour by affecting in some way the social and emotional information processing described above or the social cognitions (world schemas, scripts, normative beliefs) or emotion regulation routines stored in the brain and utilized in these processes. Second, most of the lasting influences on aggression of individual differences in biology are not deterministic effects but rather probabilistic effects. In fact, most factors only have an effect that is interactive with environmental factors. (p. 10)*

In the same way, Huesmann (2017) continues with his reasoning, stating that the effect of the two categories of influences upon the aggressive behaviour of the aggressor will materialize in the form of a certain “*emotional desensitization to the aggression and violence*”, which will have as a consequence an increase “*in the likelihood of a person following an aggressive script*” (p. 10).

Concerning the victims, the specialized literature analysis carried out by Klettke, Howard, and Clancy (2020) refers to a series of negative psychosocial consequences following the confrontation with CBB, such as lower self-esteem and life satisfaction, increased stress, depression, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, anger and frustration, conduct and emotional problems, suicidal ideation, somatic symptoms, substance abuse, decreased social connectedness, and reduced prosocial

behaviours. The same types of manifestations are supported by Wright, Wachs, and Gámez-Guadix (2022), who found that “*homophobic cyberbullying involvement was positively related to depressive and anxiety symptoms*” (Abstract).

From the recent and systematic study of the specialized literature, carried out by Vismara *et al.* (2022), there is an explicit series of consequences of the CBB at the societal level, in which all participants in the CBB process are considered, as we present below.

- Identification of all those involved in the CBB phenomenon of internet use problems, i.e., Problematic Use of the Internet (PUI), as a result of the excessive online activities associated with obvious functional impairment and/or distress;
- The subsequent consumption of substances in the case of the perpetrators, the victims, and the bystanders;
- Referring to cyberbullies, a certain dependence on the internet is noted, along with the manifestation of conduct disorders or antisocial personality disorders. Even in the case of the perpetrators, increases in the risk of suicidal behaviours were identified in comparison with the non-perpetrators.
- In the case of the victims, anxiety symptoms and post-traumatic stress symptoms were identified, as well as significantly high rates of mental disorders, simultaneously with the increase in the assumed risks of self-harm and suicidal behaviours (suicidal ideation, suicide plans, and suicide attempts). When we refer to teenagers, these consequences can manifest themselves with psychological distress, academic difficulties, loneliness, and reduced well-being;
- An interesting observation emerged when suicide and self-harm rates were compared among victims of traditional bullying and those of CBB, and in which they were found to be significantly higher in the case of CBB victims;
- Referring to the societal consequences, difficulties were found in highlighting, for example, the costs at the level of the economy of the negative influences caused directly or indirectly by CBB. However, the authors identified only the social costs of \$444 million in 2018 to the New Zealand economy.

Of course, at the societal level, there is an obvious interest in limiting all these adverse consequences of CBB as a process. Thus, various programs have emerged to combat the adverse consequences of bullying in general and the CBB in particular. However, it seems that CBB would be more effectively combated with the help of technology itself, and in particular with smart technologies.

## AI as a solution for Cyberbullying

Kustenmacher and Seiwert (2004) explain a man's inclination to resort to technology in his interaction with the environment and society. Thus, the solution to the negative consequences of Cyberbullying in a technologically dominated society is represented by technology as part of the technological paradox (Tugui, 2009), in which man has a dual role, both slave and master, in the interaction with it. In this respect, it is noted that, notably after 2010, there have been many attempts to involve artificial intelligence (AI) to recognize, identify, limit or avoid the manifestation of aggressive behaviours of the CBB type.

For an overview of the use of artificial intelligence in solving various problems related to CBB, we extracted works from the *Scopus* database that respond to the criterion of the existence of the words "cyberbullying" and "artificial intelligence" in the Title, Keywords and Abstract. These articles were the subject of the content analysis of the title and, subsequently, only those that are identified as a solution in the process of recognizing, identifying, limiting or avoiding the manifestation of CBB were kept in the following Table where we have these data synthesized and organized by years.

AI solutions to limit and combat the consequences of CBB:

- **2010** - Simulating peer support for victims of cyberbullying (van der Zwaan, Dignum, and Jonker, 2010);
- **2011** - Modeling the detection of textual cyberbullying (Dinakar, Reichart, and Lieberman, 2011);
- **2012** - Common sense reasoning for detection, prevention, and mitigation of cyberbullying (Dinakar, Jones, Havasi, Lieberman, and Picard, 2012), MISAAC: Instant messaging tool for cyberbullying detection (Pérez, Valdez, De Guadalupe Cota Ortiz, Barrera, and Pérez, 2012);
- **2013** - Expert knowledge for automatic detection of bullies in social networks (Dadvar, Trieschnigg, and De Jong, 2013)  
Low frequency keyword extraction with sentiment classification and cyberbully detection using fuzzy logic technique (Sheeba, and Vivekanandan, 2013), A qualitative evaluation of social support by an empathic agent (Van Der Zwaan, Dignum, and Jonker, 2013);
- **2014** - Automatic analysis and identification of verbal aggression and abusive behaviours for online social games (Balci, and Salah, 2014), Aggressive text detection for cyberbullying (Bosque, and Garza, 2014), Experts and machines against bullies: A hybrid approach to detect cyberbullies (Dadvar, Trieschnigg, and De Jong, 2014), Supervised machine learning for the detection of troll profiles in twitter social network: Application to a real case of cyberbullying (Galán-García, de la Puerta, Gómez, Santos, and Bringas, 2014), Cyberbullying detection and

prevention: Data mining and psychological perspective (Parime, and Suri, 2014);

- **2015** - iATTAC: A system for autonomous agents and dynamic social interactions - the architecture (Cebolledo, and De Troyer, 2015), Common sense reasoning for detection, prevention, and mitigation of cyberbullying (Dinakar, Picard, and Lieberman, 2015), Collaborative detection of cyberbullying behaviour in twitter data (Mangaonkar, Hayrapetian, and Raje, 2015);
- **2016** - Cybercrime detection in online communications: The experimental case of cyberbullying detection in the twitter network (Al-Garadi, Varathan, and Ravana, 2016), Prediction of aggressive comments in social media: An exploratory study (Del Bosque, and Garza, 2016), Sustainable cyberbullying detection with category-maximized relevance of harmful phrases and double-filtered automatic optimization (Ptaszynski, Masui, Nitta, Hatakeyama, Kimura, Rzepka, and Araki, 2016), An approach to design and analyze the framework for preventing cyberbullying (Yu, Gole, Prabhuswamy, Prakash, and Shankaramurthy, 2016), Automatic detection of cyberbullying on social networks based on bullying features (Zhao, Zhou, and Mao, 2016), Content-driven detection of cyberbullying on the instagram social network (Zhong, Li, Squicciarini, Rajtmajer, Griffin, Miller, and Caragea, 2016);
- **2017** - Harnessing the power of text mining for the detection of abusive content in social media (Chen, McKeever, and Delany, 2017), Aggressivity detection on social network comments (Chen, Yan, and Wong, K. 2017), Cyberbullying classification using extreme learning machine applied to portuguese language (da Silveira Marciano, Mendes, and Barroso, 2017), Sentiment informed cyberbullying detection in social media (Dani, Li and Liu, 2017); Multilingual cyberbullying detection system: Detecting cyberbullying in arabic content (Haidar, Chamoun, and Serhrouchni, 2017), Cyberbullying detection: A survey on multilingual techniques (Haidar., Chamoun, and Yamout, 2017), Cyberbullying: From 'old wine in new bottles' to robots and artificial intelligence (McGuckin, and Corcoran, 2017), Cyberbullying detection with weakly supervised machine learning (Raisi, and Huang, 2017), Detection and prevention measures for cyberbullying and online grooming (Upadhyay, Chaudhari, Arunesh, Ghale, and Pawar, 2017), Cyberbullying detection with a pronunciation based convolutional neural network (Zhang, Tong, Vishwamitra, Whittaker, Mazer, Kowalski, . . . Dillon, 2017);
- **2018** - NLP and machine learning techniques for detecting insulting comments on social networking platforms (Kumar Sharma, Kshitiz, and Shailendra, 2018), Machine learning and semantic analysis of in-game chat for cyberbullying (Murnion, Buchanan, Smales, and Russell, 2018);

- **2020** - Abusive language in spanish children and young teenager's conversations: Data preparation and short text classification with contextual word embeddings (Costa-Jussà, Gonzalez, Moreno, and Cumalat, 2020), Automatic labelling of malay cyberbullying twitter corpus using combinations of sentiment, emotion and toxicity polarities (Maskat, Faizzuddin Zainal, Ismail, Ardi, Ahmad, and Daud, 2020), Text imbalance handling and classification for cross- platform cyber-crime detection using deep learning (Nikhila, Bhalla, and Singh, 2020), Cyberbullying detection on multiple smps using modular neural network (Patil, Salmalge, and Nartam, 2020), Applying artificial intelligence to explore sexual cyberbullying behaviour (Sánchez-Medina, Galván-Sánchez, and Fernández-Monroy, 2020), Exploring the hidden patterns of cyberbullying on social media (Singh, Thapar, and Bagga, 2020);
- **2021** - Automatic detection of cyberbullying and threatening in saudi tweets using machine learning (Alghamdi, Al-Motery, Alma'Abdi, Alzamzami, and Babour, 2021), Cyberbullying detection in social networks: Artificial intelligence approach (Azeez, Idiakose, Onyema, and Vyver, 2021) Deepfakes on twitter: Which actors control their spread? (Dasilva, Ayerdi, and Galdospin, 2021), A novel approach to the creation of a labelling lexicon for improving emotion analysis in text (Segura Navarrete, Martinez-Araneda, Vidal-Castro, and Rubio-Manzano, 2021), A novel extended ripple and cyberbullies data detection (E- RACYBDD) framework to mitigate deep fake attacks on social media (Usharani, 2021), Automatic detection of cyberbullying using multi-feature based artificial intelligence with deep decision tree classification (Yuvaraj, Chang, Gobinathan, Pinagapani, Kannan, Dhiman, and Rajan, 2021);
- **2022** - Artificial intelligence-enabled cyberbullying-free online social networks in smart cities (Al-Marghilani, 2022), Machine learning for hate speech detection in arabic social media (Boulouard, Ouaisa, and Ouaisa, 2022), AI powered anti-cyber bullying system using machine learning algorithm of multinomial naïve bayes and optimized linear support vector machine interception of cyberbully contents in a messaging system by machine learning algorithm (Ige, and Adewale, 2022), Leveraging dignity theory to understand bullying, cyberbullying, and Children's rights (Milosevic, Collier, and Norman, 2022), Artificial intelligence to address cyberbullying, harassment and abuse: New directions in the midst of complexity (Milosevic, Van Royen, and Davis, 2022), Artificial intelligence as a service for immoral content detection and eradication (Shah, Anwar, Ul Haq, Alsalman, Hussain, and Al-Hadhrami, 2022), Personal attacks decrease user activity in social networking platforms (Urbaniak, Ptaszyński, Tempska, Leliwa, Brochocki, and Wroczyński, 2022).

As a general observation, we note that the beginning was timid around the years 2010-2012, but later a great interest in this topic and even an abundance of

ideas and solutions published in articles and at some international conferences were noted. Of course, this approach at the societal level to use more or less intelligent technologies in order to limit and combat the consequences of CBB will continue with even greater interest in the years to come, but we believe that the total exclusion of these types of behaviours will not be reached, at least in the next 20-30 years.

### **Some challenges regarding cyberbullying**

The specific literature that we analyzed on the subject of the present study leads us to consider that the challenges regarding the topic of CBB are difficult to formulate; this opinion derives even from the studies in which the title itself explicitly proposes this (Olweus, 2013). Even if in their titles other works do not propose a task of identifying these challenges, they nonetheless systematize and launch into discussion ideas on the subject.

In their study, Vismara *et al.* (2022) indirectly highlight two challenges related to the definition of the concept of the CBB, referring to the lack of consensus on this subject of completing the initial definition of bullying with other aspects such as the electronic environment, the potential duration of the aggression (24/7), the possibility of the aggressor to be anonymous, and the exposure of the victim on a much wider scale. A similar challenge in defining CBB is “*the different roles that individuals may embody*”, as it is related to the fact that “*individuals typically alternate these roles over time and based on different scenarios*” (p.2), that “*bystanders’ responses can be classified into different roles, including the victim’s support, bully reinforcement or passive response*”, and that “*some subjects present a dual identity of victim/perpetrator*” (p. 2). This challenge, assumed by the conceptual definition of the CBB, is also supported by the literature review carried out by Klettke, Howard and Clancy (2020), but also by those carried out by Saleem, Khan, Zafar and Raza, (2022) and Langos (2012).

Another particular category of challenges refers to the ethical aspects of conducting research involving children from kindergarten to high school (Lund, Helgeland, and Kovac, 2015). The challenge comes when you have to work with very young children in kindergarten, and when certain principles of communication and protection must be respected in order not to influence their subsequent school evolution. Cohen-Amagor (2018) insists on the same idea of ethics in the field of the CBB when referring to the need to use information technology in a public infosphere in which fundamental freedoms and human rights are consistently applied in the media.

A particularly important challenge for society as a whole refers to the design of the anti-bullying intervention programs (Saleem, Khan, Zafar and Raza, 2022), corroborated by the persistence (Klettke, Howard, and Clancy, 2022) of the need to “*evaluate cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs, with recommendations for future research*” (p. 8), as a result of the identification of gaps in the current knowledge,

*including a scarcity of the cyberbullying community based programs delivered by non school staff and knowledge regarding their effectiveness. Future research should consider exploration of the cyberbullying prevention and intervention programs within local communities as they may also prove successful in regards to changing the culture around cyberbullying, thereby decreasing instances of peer online aggression. (p. 8)*

The researchers in the field were challenged by Olweus (2013) regarding guiding the research on the identification of the negative effects of cyber victimization, in order to be able to understand, as clearly as possible, what are the consequences it can have on the victims, with the clear purpose of identifying effective reactions from the society to limit these consequences. At the same time, an interesting live proposal comes from Vismara *et al.*, (2022) insisting on the development of the best practice guidelines in the field, including the determination of cost-effective options for CBB prevention and treatment.

## **Conclusions**

Through this study, we had as our main objective to accomplish a bullying and cyberbullying overview in the current society dominated by change and technology.

It is important to understand that after the initial use of the term “mobbing” in 1973 by Olweus in one of his works, the option for using the term “bullying” comes from Olweus (2017) after the 1978 translation of his book in Washington, “*Aggression in the schools. Bullies and whipping boys*”. Thus, the term is used to denote *an aggressive behaviour of a person to intentionally create discomfort repeatedly to another less powerful person.*

A particularly important idea is the fact that bullying has had an omnipresent character in all the stages of human society’s evolution. Nowadays, with the digital transformation in today’s society, bullying has grown to expand into our cyberspace by using information and communication technologies such as telephones, computers and tablets, which gave rise to the concept of cyberbullying.

In terms of cyberbullying, our study answers questions such as: what is it, what forms it takes, where it occurs, who participates, what consequences it has, and what solutions are recommended to mitigate its effects. In the category of solutions, we found that, in addition to anti-bullying intervention programs, society defends itself by appealing to technology, and in particular to AI technologies, which are successfully used to recognize, identify, limit and avoid aggressive behaviours in computerized social environments. Our study finds that intelligent solutions for the CBB field increased in number after 2012, but with predilection after 2016.

From the perspective of the problems assumed by the social manifestation of CBB, we have identified challenges in relation to: i) the conceptual definition of CBB and the roles of the people involved in the process; ii) the ethical aspects involved in interacting with young children and interacting with information

technologies in public cyberspace and the respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms; iii) paying close attention to the anti-CBB intervention programs, combined with the need to assess their effectiveness and make proposals for future action at the societal level; iv) orienting researchers' attention to the negative effects of the cyber victimization, with the clear aim of being able to prepare reactions at the societal level to limit them, including the creation of the best practice guidelines in the field.

In our opinion, we believe that CBB will evolve with society and will adapt to the tools it will have at a given moment. The *Digital GAIA* scenario imagined by Vinge (2008), in conjunction with the multiplication of the artificial intelligence performances in the context of the *accelerating change* scenario predicted by Kurzweil (1999), gives us hope that society as a whole will also be able to defend itself almost entirely from aggressive behaviour if we relate to the currently known manifestations of the CBB. However, the exceptions that will be made will confirm or support the rule.

Finally, we appreciate that in the context of the transition to the *power-mind* and *biocomputing* technologies, in a forecasting horizon for the next forty to fifty years, against the background of the transhumanism scenario, there will be a transition from *cyberbullying* to the *direct- mindbullying*, which will come with other challenges specific to the new technological level.

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# A BRIEF ANALYSIS FROM A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE OF BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING

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## **Introduction**

As for the phenomenon of bullying, global statistics illustrate that it is present in schools, among children and young people, and companies, but also in the workplace. It has various manifestations and extensive consequences, both at the individual level but also at the organizational and societal levels.

Bullying is a term that is already defined and explained in universal dictionaries. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)) it is “the abuse and mistreatment of someone vulnerable by someone stronger, more powerful”.

The echo of bullying is to be found in time. As an example, in the academic world, Albert Einstein signalled as early as 1931 that he was the victim of 100 colleagues who attacked his published theories (Patel, 2022). Joined under the umbrella of this term are behaviours such as intimidation, harassment, assault/aggression, violence (physical, verbal)/“subtype of violence” (Kemp-Graham & Hendricks, 2015), humiliation, even coercion (in regard to the aggrieved person, considered as vulnerable), including “abusive mistreatment at work/in the workplace” (Namie, 2014, pp. 2, 3), where the latter considers the case of its manifestations within organizations.

Bullying is a subject that excites the attention of several categories of stakeholders: psychologists, doctors, sociologists, educational institutions, political decision-makers and legislative authorities, teachers, social workers, mass media, and researchers. Loveless (2022) considers bullying to be “an epidemic”. In this light, we could say, metaphorically, that bullying is like a contagious and socially proliferating disease that takes its toll and leaves behind painful consequences on several levels: first, for the individual who is the direct subject of the respective aggression; subsequently, within the organization where this behaviour is met, and finally, within the society where it manifests itself. It requires knowledge, a joint effort from several parties, and time to be managed.

## **Bullying – abuse of power**

From a psychological perspective, “bullying is a distinctive pattern of repeatedly and deliberately harming and humiliating others, especially those who

are smaller, weaker, younger, or in any way more vulnerable than the bully” (Psychology Today, 2022).

In the literature, “perpetrator” (or “bully”) is the term most often used to refer to the person that promotes bullying behaviour against others and harms their vulnerable victims. Taking into consideration the different faces of manifestation of this behaviour, in this chapter we will also use other terms with the same meaning (e.g., aggressor).

By considering the definition offered by the National Center against Bullying, we identify that it is an “ongoing and deliberate misuse of power”, of a verbal, physical, and social nature, promoted “to cause physical, social and/or psychological harm”(National Center against Bullying, 2022).

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, “bullying is when people repeatedly and intentionally use words and actions against someone or a group of people to cause distress and risk to their well-being” (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022). According to the same source, the list of bullying behaviours on someone includes: lack of access to the [reference] group (both physically and online); unpleasant actions towards those bullied; nasty, rude gestures, constant negative teasing; dissemination of rumours, lies and misrepresentation in regard to the given subject (including using their social media account and posting (falsely) in their name; making fun of someone beyond limits; harassment based on various criteria (race, gender etc.); physical harm (intentional and repeated); stalking; taking advantage of a power position over that person (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022).

In an integrative definition, we consider bullying to be a deliberate abuse of power (directly observed or just perceived and manifested physically, verbally, online, or combined) by one aggressor or persecutor, or a group of aggressors (Kemp-Graham & Hendricks, 2015), against one or several vulnerable individuals who have a lack of power to defend themselves. The person being bullied becomes a victim, the target of unwanted or unprovoked (highly) repeated behaviours over an extended period (Kemp-Graham & Hendricks, 2015). Considered to be intentional and unreasonable (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2022), these abusing, harmful, and systematic behaviours are directed at someone by pursuing an undisputed objective (the generation of effects or consequences - of a physical, psychological, social nature, using specific methods and tactics). This type of behaviour is designed to cause “injury and discomfort” (American Psychological Association, 2022) to the victim.

## **Types of bullying behaviour at work**

Over time, several types of bullying behaviour have been identified. According to a European Commission document (Bruckmaye & Galimberti, 2020), bullying is of four types: *direct* (a face-to-face confrontation between the aggressor and the victim, consisting of physical and verbal attacks); *indirect* (taking the form of “psychological and social aggression” based on spreading rumours or gossip

about the victim and ignoring it); *discriminatory* (based on different discrimination criteria - race, gender, sexual orientation...); as well as *cyberbullying* (that occurs online and involves harassing, threatening, and harmful peer-to-peer behaviour conducted through electronic means of social interaction).

It can be *open* (aggressive behaviours are visible, easy to identify, obvious) but also *hidden, covered* (attackers who “camouflage their bullying personality”; Patel, 2021); the actions are not directly visible, or easier to be perceived or observed).

Analysis of another classification (CDC.gov, 2021) reveals the fact that other types of bullying can also be met: *physical* (hitting the victim, kicking or punching, spitting, pushing); *verbal* (name-calling, teasing, sexual comments, verbal or oral threats); *relational/social* (excluding/marginalizing/devaluing the victim, spreading rumours/gossip, making embarrassing comments about the person in question); *damage to the property of the person* who is the subject of the harassment/bullying.

Another type of bullying, also specified within the abovementioned classification, includes the practice of cyberbullying by using modern communication technologies; it implies the use of mobile phones, computers, and other electronic devices to bully or harass other people (Loveless, 2022), through “verbal threat or harassment”, e-mail channels or social media platforms, by sending SMS/text messages (American Psychological Association, 2022), or by using the gaming platforms.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2002) distinguishes between two types of bullying behaviour at work; on an initial view, it could be related to the involvement in an interpersonal conflict that has been unresolved or escalated, while on a second view, it implies the accidental finding of the aggrieved person in a similar situation.

In another approach to the classification of bullying behaviours in the workplace (healthline.com, 2022), we find, in addition to verbal bullying, the “intimidating” type, manifested by threats to the bullied person, exclusion from social security, spying, and invasion of private space. *Intimidating bullying* can also be used in relation to individual work performance, in terms of blaming, sabotage, interference, and stealing ideas. Retaliation can take the form of false accusations, exclusions, or preventing access to promotion, while the institutional bullying manifests itself against the background of an organizational environment that is supportive, encouraging, and conducive to this behaviour (such as, for example, setting performance objectives that are not possible to achieve by the employee(s) who are the target of bullying, imposing extra work hours or singling out those who do not achieve the required performance).

In the research carried out by the Workplace Bullying Institute (Namie, 2014), 41% of the respondents indicated that the first cause of bullying is related to the perpetrator (his personality); 28% of the respondents mentioned that the work environment is encouraging to bullying, and those who bully are not punished (which means that the employer can be held responsible).

The list of bullying causes identified by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (2002) is also extensive; inside organizations/in the workplace, bullying includes elements of organizational culture (through a supportive work environment, beneficial to the aggressors or providing a fertile ground, in favour of the proliferation of this type of behaviour; Patel, 2021), organizational changes, the feeling of insecurity at work, unsatisfactory relations between staff and the management of the organization but also between colleagues, overload of work tasks, deficiencies in personnel policies or the lack of shared values, role conflict, and also general elements, such as individual (e.g., problems of a personal nature) or situational (e.g., substance use), factors (healthline.com, 2022; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002).

Research shows that in organizations, both low- and high-performing employees are subject to bullying by their supervisors (Moss, 2016); therefore, a clarifying answer to the question of “why some bosses bully their employees” is provided—the supervisors with a high score on Social Dominance Orientations tend to provide such behaviour against their staff.

Most studies show that bullying is highly prevalent among young people. In 2021, research performed on the presence of bullying in high schools and gymnasiums in Romania on a sample of 817 respondents (Statista, 2021) showed that weekly, 1.39% of students suffered from physical bullying, 4.17% from verbal bullying, 1.39% from social bullying, and 2.08% from cyberbullying.

In the USA, according to a survey conducted in 2017, a percentage of 20.2% of students reported being bullied at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Bullying is an aspect that must be analysed primarily from the perspective of the consequences, both in the short term and in the long term: young people who are the subject of bullying may feel vulnerable, frustrated, have low self-esteem, and may tend to isolate themselves from others in the face of the feeling of not being able to deal with these situations. Many students may thus be driven to drop out of school. The feeling of insecurity will place them at the bottom of Maslow’s pyramid of needs and will block them there (the security needs stage), preventing the individual from developing personally, building a solid professional career, and having a high standard of living.

At the societal level, there will be social costs; there may be medical costs for the physical and mental treatment of the victims. A cross-sectional study reveals that mental health problems among students in Sweden, by reason of bullying, increased during 2014-2020 (Källmén & Hallgren, 2021). If their health is affected from this point of view (in the form of depression, anxiety, physical health problems, low ability to achieve school performance, subsequent adoption and promotion of violent behaviours on others, substance abuse, and suicide) (Stopbullying.gov, 2021), then their social integration costs or actual economic losses as a result of the downfall of the creative labour potential of those people who have experienced bullying will result into individuals less integrated and self-

confident, less powerful and innovative and less oriented towards collaborations and team working.

At the same time, we must not neglect the long-term consequences for those who cause the bullying, who are in the role of aggressors, who may even be children, and who may have deviant behaviours later in their adult lives; ending up abusing alcohol and prohibited substances, being violent with close ones, their own families; engaging in criminal, anti-social acts; dropping out of school and becoming non-integrated members of the workforce, in society; and having a very low standard of living.

## **Mobbing**

Zapf uses the term *mobbing* (Zapf, 1999) as a synonym for bullying and analyses its forms of manifestation in the workplace. In his understanding, this is “a severe form of social stressors” (different from those that usually exist), “a long-term escalated conflict, with frequent acts of harassment systematically directed at a certain person” (Zapf, 1999), manifesting in the form of rumours, social isolation, verbal aggression, physical aggression, organizational measures, the attack on one’s private sphere, and the attack on one’s attitudes.

A report published by the Workplace Bullying Institute (2021)-*WBI 2021 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey of Adult Americans*, shows that 79.3 million American employees are affected by workplace bullying.

A recent survey conducted among the staff in higher education institutions in Ireland (4000 respondents from 20 colleges and universities) found that a third of them felt they had been bullied at work, particularly if they were part of a minority group (LGBTQ, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities), with negative consequences for their mental health and well-being (Murray, 2022).

Another study, carried out in Japan (Tsuno, 2015) on the data of a sample of 1546 employees, demonstrated that bullying at work was experienced by employees or that they had witnessed behaviours of this kind; the research results show that temporary employees, high school graduates, those with the lowest household income, and those with the lowest level of subjective social status are most at risk of being bullied at work. This proven fact has inevitable consequences, both on individuals (on a personal and professional level) and on the organization itself—employees will feel frustration, anxiety, and will be less engaged and productive at work, which will ultimately be reflected in organizational performance.

Recent studies conducted in 2019 and 2020 by the Association for Perioperative Practice (AfPP) show that in the UK, bullying is a significant and widespread problem in healthcare, “almost becoming an accepted part of perioperative care teams,” generating concern among employees for their well-being but also for the safety of patients (Mitchell, 2020). Ariza-Montes and Rodríguez (2014) demonstrated in their study that workplace bullying exists in institutions in the financial sector, and also concluded that bank employees with

temporary employment contracts are more exposed to the risk of workplace bullying.

A synthesis investigation made by Vveinhardt *et.al.* (2018) based on research topics found in the specialized literature of the variables that can be considered in the assessment of the losses generated by bullying and harassment includes: loss of employees; decline in workplace productivity; employee morbidity; legal costs, with compensations; fines. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that in some cases even the customers bully the employees who serve them. *Table no. 1.* presents a holistic and integrative picture of bullying behaviour, by considering the nature of the behaviour, the number of people who are victims or those who bully, the types of evidence, forms of manifestation, types of bullying, the environment in which it takes place/manifests, people aggressor, causes, effects/consequences on the aggrieved person, and the level at which the consequences are manifested.

**Table 1.** An integrative picture of the manifestation of bullying behaviour

|  |   |
|--|---|
| The nature of bullying behaviour                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- direct</li> <li>- indirect</li> </ul>  |
| Number of people aggressing (aggressors)/number of people attacked | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- one people</li> <li>- group/several people</li> </ul>  |
| Records/Evidence   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- open, easy to be seen/observed, obvious</li> <li>- covered, hidden actions, difficult to be observed</li> </ul>  |
| Types of bullying  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- physically, face to face (traditional)</li> <li>- online, through digital technology (cyberbullying)</li> </ul>  |
| Types of aggressive/bullying behaviours                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- physical (attack, push, physical harassment)</li> <li>- verbal (insults, nicknames, verbal harassment)</li> <li>- relational/social (exclusion from a reference group, restricting access to a group, isolation, discrimination, social denigration, devaluation of the person, stigmatization - gossip/rumours, lies)</li> <li>- on the person's property (physical damage, image damage)</li> <li>- cyberbullying (diffusion of lies, distribution of embarrassing/derogatory audio-video spots on social media/platforms to the person who is the subject of bullying, sending embarrassing, abusive, harmful, harassing text,</li> <li>- photo and/or video messages to the person being bullied, threatening on messaging channels; posting messages from the victim's social media account, in their name, or creating a fake account with that person's name and posting from it, which leads to the social vulnerability of the victim.</li> </ul> |

A Brief Analysis from a Socio-Economic Perspective of Bullying and Cyberbullying

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|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the consequence of involvement in an interpersonal conflict that is escalated (cf. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002)</li> <li>- accidental involvement in a bullying situation and suffering aggression from the person who does this act (cf. European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2002)</li> </ul>   |
| The environment in which it occurs /manifests  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- educational/school (kindergartens/primary schools, middle school, high school, university)</li> <li>- organizational (firms, institutions/ workplace)</li> <li>- society/societal (in the group of neighbours, friends etc)</li> </ul>  |
| Aggressor persons                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- children (who bully other children)</li> <li>- young people (who bully other young people, of the same age or people who are younger or older but vulnerable, with less power to defend themselves/act)</li> <li>- colleagues who bully other colleagues, according to various discriminatory criteria (gender, age, race, sexual orientation, professional status etc.)</li> <li>- bosses who bully subordinates (unjustified change of work tasks or their degree of difficulty, power distance)</li> <li>- subordinates aggressing their bosses (failure to fulfil tasks, disrespectful attitude towards bosses, spreading rumours towards bosses, generating situations to show that bosses are incompetent)</li> <li>- person who uses the online environment to bully/intimidate a person who does not use the online environment; Internet users among themselves (the aggressor and the victim use the online environment)</li> <li>- customers aggressing the company's employees</li> </ul> |
| Causes generating bullying                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- individual (e.g., personal issues, "narcissism, self-efficacy, anger" (Patel, 2021)) and situational (e.g., substance abuse) issues related to the aggressor</li> <li>- societal (in societies/countries with income inequalities, the level of bullying in schools is higher (Due et al. (2009) and Elgar et al. (2013), cited by Chaux &amp; Castellanos (2014); and the socio-economic situation of the bullied, the regional situation (Pillay, 2021)</li> </ul>  |
| Effects / Consequences on the aggrieved person | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- physical damage (physical injury, damage over time to physical health)</li> <li>- psychological impairment (stress, anxiety, fear, insecurity, low self-esteem, impairment over time of mental health/mental state/well-being, substance abuse and violence)</li> </ul>   |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- affecting social relations, social/social image/status, hindering professional development</li> <li>- material damage</li> <li>- mixed effects - psychological and social/relational impairment</li> </ul>  |
| <p>The level at which the consequences are manifested</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- individual (anxiety, stress, health problems and implicitly all costs generated by these issues; lack of work motivation and less integration within an organization or society; negative effects on the professional career and all indirect costs generated by it, including on the family member's situation);</li> <li>- organizational (costs of lawsuits, in the case of lawsuits brought by employees/former employees who suffered bullying; costs due to low productivity among bullied employees, demotivation and lack of loyalty among directly affected staff, high turnover rates, absenteeism, poor/untrusty working climate, poor communication among members, and low teamwork spirit and dynamics (healthline.com, 2022).</li> <li>- societal (short and long term) medical costs for treating people abused by bullying and of the aggressors; economic costs by losing good and productive labour force (in the case of the affected individuals); costs of managing the conflicts generated by bullying in the school environment, the necessity to hire qualified staff and experts to manage the phenomenon in the environment in which it occurs.</li> <li>- indirect costs generated by the loss of potential labour force; image costs (at community/national and/or international levels)</li> </ul> |

(Source: Elaboration by the authors based on the literature review and official documents on the topic)

### **The socio-economic impact of bullying. Assessing the costs.**

Victims who are involved in incidents of bullying and cyberbullying are at high risk of developing psychological and behavioural troubles, somatization, physical injuries, drug and alcohol problems, suicide attempts, and abandoning school.

Many studies showed the relationship between bullying/cyberbullying victimisation and its long-term consequences: depression (8-20%, according to Avenevoli et al. in 2015), dropping out school, according to Villado & Arthur (2013), and suicide attempts with rates between 17-19% (Cha et al., 2018). Adolescents involved in either school bullying or cyberbullying have risky consumption rates up to 3 times higher. According to a study conducted by Pichel et al. (2022), victims, perpetrators, and bully victims seemed to be strongly associated with a pattern of alcohol abuse.

The mentioned adverse outcomes of bullying and cyberbullying may determine substantial costs for individuals (especially victims and aggressors), their families, schools, and society at large (Fang et al., 2017). The economic impact of bullying could appear in various health and human service systems such as healthcare, school education projects, NGOs projects, criminal justice, child welfare, police interventions, and social services. There are direct and indirect costs related to the bullying phenomenon, also including productivity loss and absence. The scientific literature also presents the “intangible costs” (i.e., loss of quality of life and lifetime) that may sometimes be included in the cost of illness related to bullying and aggressive behaviours.

Bullying is a modifiable risk factor for mental illness (Scott et al., 2014) and other long-term consequences. Some costs are due to immediate and direct interventions, but some others are related to long-term interventions. A study by Fosse (2006) identified that more than 50% of adults seeking medical care reported bullying victimisation during childhood or adolescence, and Evans-Lacko et al. (2017) identified that children who were frequently bullied were more likely to use mental health services in childhood and adolescence as well as in midlife.

Studies developed in several schools in California showed that there is a direct link between bias-based bullying and school absenteeism, determined by the feeling of unsafety in the school environment. Data collected between 2011 and 2013 by the California Healthy Kids Survey and the California Department of Education proved that annually, school districts lose an estimated \$276 million of unallocated funds because of student absences. The results mentioned that the absence of students who experienced bullying based on their race or ethnicity resulted in an estimated loss of \$78 million in unallocated funds (Baams et al., 2017).

In the United Kingdom, McDaid et al. (2017) distinguished between the short-term and long-term costs of bullying, from a societal perspective. Their study identified that there is a return on investment of 1.58 pounds and 146.78 pounds, respectively, for every pound invested. Similar results were identified by Masiello et al., (2012). The researchers estimated that preventing high school bullying results in lifetime cost benefits of over \$1.4 million per individual.

In Finland, data collected by Sourander et al. (2016) proved an association between being a victim of bullying at 8 years of age and the use of specialized psychiatric medical services by 29 years of age.

In Australia, for example, PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting investigated in 2018 the economic impact and cost analysis of bullying in Australian schools. The analysis showed that there is a short-term cost (for the course of one student over 13 years of school) and a long-term economic impact of bullying for each individual school year cohort over a 20-year period after leaving school (PwCAustralia & Foundation, 2018). Some other data are congruent with the results, showing that the impact of victimisation on the psychological health of the victims is extremely important – victims will have problems with socialisation, integration, finding a job, and becoming financially independent. Data provided by

studies also conducted in Australia showed that there is a substantial annual cost to Australian society as a result of bullying victimization. Jadambaa et al. (2021) identified that more than 8% of annual mental health expenditure in Australia was estimated to be attributable to bullying victimization, meaning healthcare costs for treating anxiety and depressive disorders (AUD \$750 million), intentional self-harm (AUD \$57 million), tobacco use (AUD \$224 million), productivity losses of victims' caregivers (AUD \$7.5 million) and educational services (AUD \$6 million).

The studies that analysed the socio-economic impact of bullying conclude that this is a costly phenomenon at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

Employees who have been victims of bullying spend, on average, twice as much money on the necessary treatment for mental health problems (such as "poor mental health, sleep deprivation, and stress-related illnesses") compared to non-bullied employees (Igoe, 2020). One in 10 employees is affected by bullying, leading to "staff absenteeism, sick leave costs and lost productivity," which globally cost employers billions of dollars annually (Tuckey et al., 2022). Organizations have high staff turnover - 65% of employees who have suffered from bullying have left the organization or have been fired by their employers (Sparkman, 2020).

In a recent study, Cullinan *et al.* (2020) estimated the economic cost of bullying in terms of lost productivity in the public and private sectors in Ireland. According to the analysis, the estimated annual costs are "€52 million in the public sector and €188 million in the private sector, and overall annual productivity losses of €239 million" (p. 255).

Harrison Psychological Associates (Siwach, 2015) also reveals in terms of the financial impact that, as a consequence of the manifestation of bullying behaviour (harassment of employees), the value of the business cost supported by employers, in an interval of 2 years, is more than \$180 million, in terms of lost time and productivity.

In an earlier study, based on data from the Health and Safety Executive, Giga *et al.* (2008) estimated that in the UK, the costs borne by society due to workplace bullying were approximately £682.5 million (p.3).

Using an online tool (*The Dana Measure of the Financial Cost of Conflict*), which estimates the financial costs of conflict in the organization, Parris (n/y) found out that her own experience as a bullied employee (considering only six months of a period of several years) generated losses of \$300,000.00 for the company.

From an opposite perspective, research shows (Parris, n/y) that organizations where "employees are treated properly" (i.e., it is not an environment conducive to bullying) perform 30-40% better than organizations where bullying exists. For example, a case study presented by Hoel et al. (2004), describing a bullying event (a subordinate bullied his manager) that took place in a local authority in the U.K., reveals that the total cost (minimum) to the organization to solve it was £28,109. The list of costs is long, reflecting a significant use of financial

and human resources (detailed in Table 7.1, p. 156): “Absence” [costs], “Replacement costs”, “Reduced productivity” (unknown or difficult to assess), “Investigators’ time for grievance investigation”, “Local management line-management time”, “Head office personnel”, “Corporate officers’ time” (including staff welfare), “Cost of the disciplinary process (hearing/solicitor)”, “Witness interview costs”, “Transfers” (0), “Litigation” (unknown or difficult to assess; 0), “Effects on those indirectly involved” (unknown or difficult to assess), “Miscellaneous” (effects on public relations etc.) (unknown or difficult to assess).

In an online article (Leveson, 2017), Bevan Catley (the Associate Head of the School of Management, Massey University, New Zealand), opines that the bullying impact is on the whole group, including the witnesses to it and on the whole organization. According to the cited expert, businesses often don’t take into consideration the costs of bullying (which is needed to waste time and other resources managing it). According to Catley, there might be situations when, due to bullying, people’s schedules must be changed to avoid having one person work with another person; the well-being and productivity of employees that report, the morale, motivation, and turnover of staff are negatively affected. There are direct costs for the organization: litigation costs, buyouts, and compensations; also there are the indirect costs-employer’s reputation; the best employees, even if they weren’t the target of bullying, might be affected, and be tempted to leave the organization.

The existence of bullying in the institutions of the educational sector also generates costs—the schools lose funding from the state. Implicitly, there are costs for society, given that some student victims choose to drop out of school. In the long term, this means significant losses for the society.

The education sector is hardly impacted by the existence of bullying behaviour and, as a result, it pays an important social and financial tribute. Statistics show that 10% of students leave school for this reason (Bradford, 2010, cited by Fike, 2012, p. 109). This data should be correlated with another ones: for the 1.2 million students who dropped out or did not graduate in 2004, an estimated loss of \$325 billion resulted from the loss over time of [potential] income, taxes, and productivity (according to the data provided by the Alliance for Excellent Education, cited by Bushweller, 2006, and Fike, 2012, p.109). As a result, there is a significant economic-social impact on a wide range of stakeholders: the students themselves, but also their families, schools, and other educational institutions where students could have continued their studies, potential employers, organizations with related activities (e.g., recruitment firms, the state, and the society in general).

The research of Baams *et al.* (2017) draws attention to the economic losses suffered by district schools in California - these do not receive full funding due to the absenteeism among students who are victims of bias-based bullying (and who feel insecure at school). The loss (unallocated funds) was estimated at \$276 million

(p.428); projected losses (unallocated funds), as a result of bullying based on race or ethnicity were estimated at \$77.9 million (p.427).

Data show that in Australia as well (ABC Radio National, 2018), more than 900,000 students feel the effects of bullying every year, which generates economic costs of more than \$500 million per year, “related to the time spent by school staff to deal with the crisis.”

### **Assessing the costs of bullying**

An economic analysis of the costs generated by bullying forces us to consider the implications for organizations, society, and also the individual (the human dimension).

Quantifying these costs is not entirely relevant, as the numbers may reflect a situation that may not fully capture the long-term effects on those who have been bullied, including their families or the organization.

The costs directly associated with bullying are not easy to assess. On the one hand, as Giga *et al.* (2008) suggested, there is not a common definition of bullying (p.9). That is why employers can effectively deny the existence of bullying in their organization.

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute (2021), employers may react inappropriately and look for various justifications to evade that bullying exists in their organization (WBI 2021 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey of Adult Americans; for more details, see infographic Employer Responses): “*It does not happen here.*”; “[...] *is necessary to be competitive.*”; “*It has no serious impact here.*”; “*It’s a routine way of doing business.*”; “*Bully managers need to be defended.*”

On the other hand, as it appears from the analysis carried out by Giga *et al.* (2008), several variables must be taken into account when calculating the costs: the prevalence rate of bullying; its extensive impact; the relationship between workplace stress, violence, and bullying; the difference between what is meant by direct costs (e.g., the costs with injuries, sickness absenteeism, staff turnover); indirect costs (such as lost opportunity, cost of time, loss of productivity, reduced quality of life, reduced income, costs generated by psychological and physical suffering); the hidden costs (those generated by the need to investigate bullying complaints and monitor absenteeism in the organization); but also the time frame that must be taken into account to calculate these costs (“applied with a gradual reduction in value over time”, p. 12). The abovementioned authors offer two valuable methods of calculating the financial cost of bullying: the deductive method (based on data related to the costs of work-related stress and absenteeism at work) and the inductive method (starting from different categories of costs and related indicators), those “associated with absenteeism, turnover, and productivity” (p.27).

The Workplace Bullying Institute provides employers with a helpful online application/calculator to assess the costs of bullying in their organization (Calculating costs to Employers, see <https://workplacebullying.org/employer->

costs/). The calculation formula takes into account several costs related to: the staff turnover (related to recruitment ads for new employees; recruitment expenses; time allocated by managers for hiring; hiring expenses/bonuses but also production losses), the opportunity lost (by losing the value created by the leaving employee, e.g., sales), the absenteeism (sickness leave, days off etc.), the presenteeism (affected employees come to work, but are no longer productive; they are the so-called “3-D” employees - “disgruntled, disgusted and desperate”); the litigation; the compensation and disability insurance; and costs needed if a firm is hired to investigate the fraud.

## Conclusion

Although across all developed countries, legislative support directly or indirectly addresses the prevention and punishment of this behaviour, its subtle forms and nuances are fertile and challenging to identify and quantify. Consequently, legislative initiatives are not sufficient to eradicate bullying. Educating individuals on this topic from the earliest stages of age is essential. The individual must be made aware of the negative impact of this behaviour not only on others, but also on himself/herself, of the risks that may arise for his/her person when he/she is in the position of the aggressor, but also of being aggressed in turn.

In organizations, managers must be aware of the adverse effects of bullying on employees, the work climate, productivity in general, the performance and reputation of the organization, and their own reputation. They have the formal authority and the tools to be the promoters of a work climate conducive to harmonious relations between employees, a strong organizational culture based on ethical values, inclusion, and diversity, which supports performance, which is for the benefit of the staff, and the economic and social well-being of the organization.

Among the key aspects that are necessary to be taken into consideration by managers in order to eliminate workplace bullying in their organization are: solid implementation of organizational anti-bullying policies (including monitoring their effects); authentic leadership based on transparent and empathetic communication; creating a climate of collaboration between employees; organizing training programs on the topic, as well as team building; and, of high importance, establishing realistic and fair standards of performance for all staff. Also, in this sense, the signals transmitted from the top of the managerial pyramid regarding the intolerance of workplace bullying are essential.

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# CYBERBULLYING AND THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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**Rareş-Vasile VORONEANU-POPA**

## **Introduction**

Globalisation has brought with it not only a new era of technology, but also problematic issues related to human behaviour online. The concept of cyber security encompasses not only certain crimes that perpetrators can commit, but also the behaviour that people exhibit towards other internet users.

In recent years, information technology, as well as computer technology, has undergone many essential changes. Moreover, the Internet has even become an effect and consequence of democracy, as it is the place where the right to freedom of expression is easily exercised. If we look at the issue of freedom, we also see that, through the Internet, people are free to support their political preferences, their religious preferences and so on. As an advantage, use and expression on the World Wide Web is one that can be quickly distributed by others, so the message is not limited by the physical boundaries of countries or the great distance between state entities. From an alternative perspective, it is also true that cyberspace is favourable both to the development of criminal behaviour and to actions that can be classified as bullying.

As the name suggests, cyberbullying is a form of traditional bullying, manifested, however, at the cyber level through the internet and other modern technologies (Veveřa et al, 2019). Thus, we are referring to those actions aimed at humiliating, intimidating, demeaning, and so on, one or more people through computer technologies. The effect of this behaviour is to denigrate the victim so that the victim becomes a vulnerable target.

From this perspective, state entities have been faced with a new challenge, namely, to adapt to the changing social realities: the creation of a legislative framework capable of responding to the needs of victims of cyber bullying. Today, the criminal sector is a wide-ranging one, which is why the legal framework must also contain levers that the state can use effectively. Criminal offences carried out in the virtual space have fewer limits than what we call ordinary crime, and are therefore more dangerous and difficult to control, because of (among other things) the potential conflicts of jurisdiction that may arise between the authorities involved in its prevention, as well as the dilution of the criminal significance of each separate segment of activity, potentially carried out in different territories (Dunea, 2019).

According to “Kids safety by Kaspersky”, cyberbullying takes ten forms: gossip - advocating matters that are not proven to be false or real, with the ultimate

goal of denigrating a person; exclusion - exclusion from purposeful online activities or groups; harassment - engaging in behaviour that harms the victim, and uploading denigrating pictures or conversations to cyberspace; tracking online activity - action that involves transposing misunderstandings from the virtual to the real world by reviewing all the activities carried out by the victim on the Internet; provocation - encouraging a person to adopt aggressive behaviour; comments - offending by using comments that are added to the online activities carried out; pressing - repeatedly sending messages even though the victim has expressed a desire not to respond; creating false accounts - activity involving the creation of accounts that hide the person's real identity or impersonate a person communicating with the victim; deception - presenting false things as true, or vice versa, in order to obtain information about the victim; sabotage - activity involving the replacement of details on a person's virtual profile page and communication on their behalf; assault recording - filming with a device that stores images while the victim is being assaulted, and distributing the recording to others, with the aim of creating an image of humiliation of the vulnerable person; sexting - distributing pornographic material featuring minors via electronic means of communication. Incidentally, in the US legal system, sexting is a prosecutable offence, but this varies from state to state depending on the applicable law (Strasburget et al., 2019).

### **Cyberbullying among children and adolescents**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that a minor is “a person who has not reached the age of 18 years”. From a procedural point of view, according to Article 505 of the New Code of Criminal Procedure, when the hearing of the minor takes place, their parents shall be summoned or, as the case may be, their legal guardian, custodian, or person in whose care or under whose supervision the juvenile was placed temporarily, as well as the General Department for Social Assistance and Child Protection in the locality where the hearing is to take place. If the exact age of the person cannot be established, the law presumes that he or she is a minor, but only if there are grounds to believe so.

The minor also has the right to propose evidence, raise exceptions or make submissions or other requests. In addition, there is the possibility to consult the file, the right to an interpreter and so on.

Franco and Ghanayim (2021) analysed the difficulties encountered by all strata of the legal system in identifying, indicting, and convicting minors of such behaviours and proposed a rethinking of existing law. The authors proposed new model for handling the phenomenon of cyberbullying among children, adolescents, and young adults, in general, more centred on the formulation of three “aggravating categories: the harmful communication's extent of sexuality, degree of intensity, and extent of violence”, with one of the three sufficing for the application of the criminal offense. The researchers proposed this approach in order to better distinguish between anti-social behaviours that are not criminalized

and those that must be criminalized. The last category represents severe and substantial violations of social values and imposes criminal regulation.

### **Cyberbullying among adults**

With adults, the legal provisions providing for procedural rights are similar to those for minors. Moreover, the possibility to be represented by a lawyer, to put questions to witnesses, defendants and experts, and the right to be heard are procedural guarantees granted to every victim. Even if the adult is not considered as vulnerable (in principle), the criminal law protects his or her rights, as the good functioning of society is influenced by the defence of the subject of the law.

Even if the pick of cyberbullying was identified in adolescence, data from literature showed that high rates of cyberbullying were identified during adulthood. A lot of theories explained the context of aggressive behaviours in online context, starting from psychological perspective, behavioural explanation, pathological aspect, and social rules. In many countries, cyberbullying has no regulation laws, and this wide-spread phenomenon demands urgent intervention for all categories of ages.

### **Cyberbullying - from self-aggression to hetero-aggression. From suicide to homicide**

The issue of cyberbullying must also be addressed from the perspective of suicide. Even today, there are countries that punish suicide attempts, but this is not the case in Romania. Problems arise if there is no legal framework to establish the exact framing of the facts, which can lead not only to inconsistent practice, but also to possible violation of certain rights. However, studies have shown that offline harassment is often accompanied by cyber harassment, leading to suicide (Kaspersky).

### **Reporting to the authorities**

In terms of the referral to the authorities, we consider the complaint to be submitted to the authorities, and this must include name, surname, personal identification number, the quality and address of the petitioner, the indication of the legal or conventional representative, the description of the fact which is the subject of the complaint, as well as the indication of the perpetrator and the means of evidence if known. Of interest is the following issue: it is not compulsory to mention the exact framing, as prosecuting authorities have the right to change it if necessary. It may also be made orally, in which case it will be recorded in a report. For a minor under the age of 14, the complaint shall be filed by his/her legal representative, and for a person aged 14-18, the complaint shall be filed only with the agreement of the parent or authorised person.

## **Identity theft**

Of interest in relation to identity theft is the Supreme Court decision No 4/2021, which states that identity theft in the virtual environment is a criminal offence. Moreover, Article 325 of the Criminal Code, “The unlawful inputting, alteration or deletion of computer data, or unlawful restriction of access to such data, resulting in inauthentic data, to be used to produce legal consequences, constitutes an offence and shall be punishable by no less than 1 and no more than 5 years of imprisonment.” Therefore, opening an account on a social network, using real username and data, is an offence under criminal law.

## **Pornography**

On the issue of distributing intimate images without consent, Decision No 51/2021 was published in the Official Gazette No 1050, which decided that distributing such images without consent is a criminal offence. Thus, Article 226 of the Criminal Code, entitled Violation of privacy, states that (2) “The unlawful disclosure, dissemination, presentation or transmission of sounds, conversations or images set out in par. (1) to another person or to the general public shall be punishable by no less than 3 months and no more than 2 years of imprisonment or by a fine.”

## **Translating crimes into cyberspace - Romania**

What crimes under the law should we keep in mind when discussing cyberbullying in Romania? First of all, we have to consider art. 206 of the New Criminal Code - Threats, art. 207 of the New Criminal Code - Blackmail, art. 208 of the New Criminal Code - Harassment.

According to Article 206 of the New Criminal Code, threat represents (1) “The act of threatening an individual with the commission of an offense or of a prejudicial act against them or other individual, if this is of nature to cause a state of fear, shall be punishable by no less than 3 months and no more than 1 year of imprisonment or by a fine; however, the applied penalty may not exceed the penalty established by law for the offense that was the subject matter of the threat. (2) Criminal action shall be initiated based on a prior complaint filed by the victim.”

The legislator therefore understood the need to protect the individual’s mental freedom, an important component of the right to individual liberty. The material element of the offence comprises three components. A first condition is that the threat must relate to the commission of a criminal offence or a harmful act (Cioclei, 2016). A second component requires that the act provided for by the criminal law, or the harmful action, be aimed at either the victim or another person. In principle, in order for the offence to be present, the threat must be directed at a person towards whom the victim has feelings. The last condition is that the threat must be serious, i.e. it must be capable of producing a state of fear. It is particularly important to point out that a threat made by a person subject to the law, by

informing them that they will take legal action to enforce their rights, will not be considered an offence under criminal law.

Regarding the sanctions applied and the procedural aspects to be considered, the crime of threat has two consequences: imprisonment or a fine. As a special feature, the penalty to be imposed on the offender may not exceed the penalty laid down by law for the act provided for by the criminal law which was the subject of the threat. Furthermore, criminal proceedings may be brought only on the injured party's preliminary complaint.

According to Article 295 of the New Code of Criminal Procedure, (1) "A criminal investigation shall only start on the basis of receiving a prior complaint by the victim, in the case of offenses for which the law mandates it". As for the elements it must contain, Art. 289 para. (2) states that "The complaint shall comprise: surname, name, personal identification code, capacity and domicile of the plaintiff, or in case of legal entities the name, head office, unique registration code, tax identification code, registration number from the Trade Registry Office or the Registry of Legal Entities and bank account, name of legal or conventional representative, description of the actions forming the object of the complaint, and indication of the offender and evidence, if known." If made in writing, a complaint shall be signed by the victim or the proxy. For a person devoid of mental competence, the complaint shall be filed by their legal representative, and a person with limited mental competence can file a complaint having secured agreement from the people stipulated by civil law (Micu, 2015). In case the offender is the person that legally represents or is entitled to approve the actions of the victim, the criminal investigation bodies shall take action *ex officio*.

According to Article 289 para. (10), "In case the complaint is filed by a person who lives on Romanian territory, is a Romanian citizen, a foreign citizen, or a stateless person, and thereby they inform of the commission of a criminal offense on the territory of another European Union Member State, the judicial body shall accept the complaint and transmit it to the jurisdictional body in the country on whose territory the offense was committed. The rules on international judicial cooperation in criminal matters shall apply accordingly."

Article 207 of the New Criminal Code states that (1) "Coercion of an individual to give, to do, not do, or suffer something for the purpose of unlawfully acquiring a non-financial benefit, for themselves or for another individual, shall be punishable by no less than 1 and no more than 5 years of imprisonment. (2) The same penalty shall apply to a threat to disclose a real or fictitious fact that is compromising for the threatened individual or for a member of their family, for the purpose set under par. (1). (3) If the acts set by par. (1) and par. (2) were committed for the purpose of deriving a financial benefit, for themselves or for another individual, they shall be punishable by no less than 2 and no more than 7 years of imprisonment."

Therefore, by incriminating blackmail, the legislator has decided that it is necessary to distinguish between acts aimed at obtaining non-pecuniary benefits

and pecuniary benefits. The primary legal object concerns those social relations which are at the centre of a person's mental freedom, while the secondary legal object concerns social relations relating to the person's physical integrity or health, property, honour, or dignity (M. Udroui, 2019).

The material element of the factual side involves an action intended to coerce another person (physically or mentally), i.e., to force them, against their will, to adopt a certain conduct. Therefore, coercion may be by physical violence, in which case we refer to the offence provided for in Article 193 of the New Criminal Code (Battery and other acts of violence), while the concept of threat refers to Article 206 of the New Criminal Code. Moreover, if medical care requires more than 90 days, the offence of blackmail will be considered as a concurrent offence with the offence of bodily harm under Article 194 of the New Criminal Code. If the victim fails to make the claim, the extortion will be held in its consummated form - since the protected social value has been damaged (Eremia, 2012).

Therefore, what is relevant is whether the victim is determined to give, do, or not do, or suffer a certain consequence. With regard to the phrase "to give", we can think of an action involving the handing over of goods, for example. "To do" or "not to do" implies the assumption of active or passive behaviour, depending on the situation, while "to suffer" refers to exposure to behaviour that may humiliate, for example, the victim.

Inducing a sense of fear in the victim so that the person's mental freedom is affected is an important component, and, moreover, it is not mandatory that there be compliance with the demands made by the perpetrator. Unlike other offences, since the degree of social danger is high, the legislator decided that the penalty should be imprisonment without the possibility of a criminal fine. Also, criminal proceedings are initiated *ex officio*, and not only upon preliminary complaint by the victim.

According to Article 208 of the New Criminal Code, (1) "The act of an individual who repeatedly, with or without a right or legitimate interest, pursues an individual or supervises their domicile, working place or other places attended by the latter, thus causing to them a state of fear, shall be punishable by no less than 3 and no more than 6 months of imprisonment or by a fine. (2) Making of phone calls or communications through remote communication devices which, through their frequency or content, cause a state of fear to an individual, shall be punishable by no less than 1 and no more than 3 months of imprisonment or by a fine, unless such act represents a more serious offense. (3) Criminal action shall be initiated based on a prior complaint filed by the victim."

Thus, the term "harassment" refers to annoying actions by insistently repeating the same thing (demands, reproaches, etc.), and as approximate synonyms, various dictionaries refer to several actions such as teasing, stepping on, not leaving someone alone, teasing, nagging (D. Nițu, 2011). From a legal point of view, the offence protects the person's mental freedom, but what is incidental in cyberspace is para. (2). Thus, the communications mentioned in the law consider

all the possibilities that today's technology offers social networks, audio-video calls, e-mail, social networking applications and so on. What is relevant for the act to meet the constituent elements of the offence is that the frequency must be high, so that the actions cause the victim a state of fear. If, during telephone calls or other types of communication, the message of danger becomes explicit and refers to the commission of a crime or a harmful act, the act will be classified as a threatening offence (Udroiu, 2019).

From a procedural point of view, the offence represents a relatively low degree of dangerousness, so that the penalty not only has lower limits, but the court may even opt for a criminal fine. Moreover, since it is for the victim to decide whether the actions of another subject of the law cause him or her discomfort, criminal proceedings will only be brought if there is a complaint to that effect.

In Romania, in addition to criminal complaints that can be addressed to the competent authorities, there is also the possibility of claiming compensation for damages through civil proceedings. We are therefore considering civil liability in tort, an institution governed by Article 1349 of the Civil Code.

### **Cyberbullying - data from other countries**

A short analysis of the issue of imposing legal sanctions against cyberbullying is reflected differently in the national legislation of each state.

In *France*, the issue of harassment is covered by Article 222-33-2-2 of the Criminal Code, and if the acts are committed via public online communication services or digital platforms, the penalty is both imprisonment for 2 years and a fine of 30,000 euros. Similar to the Romanian law, the French law also stipulates that harassment must be repeated. An interesting peculiarity of the offence of harassment in French law, a specificity that has an impact on the phenomenon of cyberbullying, is that it can be committed by several people, successively, as it can be of a repeated nature (Iftimiei, 2018).

*Italy* has decided that defamatory messages or insults published on the internet against a person who has not reached the age of majority should be punished by the authorities. The background to this legal framework was the tragedy of Carolina Picchio, who decided to commit suicide at the age of 14 after being filmed having sex at a party. Thus, under Article 1 of Law no. 71/2017, Italy defined cyberbullying as any form of psychological pressure, harassment, blackmail, injury, insult, denigration, defamation, identity theft, modification, illicit acquisition, manipulation, illegal processing of personal data of minors and/or dissemination by electronic means, including the distribution of online content featuring one or more members of the minor's family whose intentional and predominant purpose is to isolate a minor or a group of minors by implementing a serious abuse, malicious attack (Council of Europe, Italy, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/italy>).

Moreover, minors who have reached the age of 14 and their parents are recognised as having the right to contact the website or social media provider to

request the deletion of the victim's personal data and to do so, it is also necessary to indicate the link referred to. In order for anti-cyberbullying strategies to be successful, schools are required by the regulations in force to appoint a teacher to coordinate initiatives aimed at combating online bullying. (Council of Europe, Italy, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/italy>).

*Portugal* has decided that hate speech should be punished, with the legislator introducing provisions to this effect in both the Constitution and the criminal code. Thus, the principles of non-discrimination as well as equality have been enshrined, and the discriminations that the law enshrines are related to religious, racial, sexual, and other differences. (Council of Europe, Portugal, <https://rm.coe.int/portugal-nationalreporting-en/pdf/16808a38df>).

According to Article 13(2) of the Portuguese Constitution: "No one shall be privileged, favoured, prejudiced, deprived of any right or exempted from any duty on the basis of ancestry, sex, race, language, place of origin, religion, political or ideological beliefs, education, economic situation, social circumstances or sexual orientation".

Furthermore, Articles 297 and 298 of the Criminal Code establish that actions that give rise or instigate the commission of a specific crime, as well as actions that rewards or exalts another person for having committed a crime, are punishable, even if the actions are carried out by means of technical reproduction.

In order to provide the victims with protection and counselling, "The Portuguese Victims Support Association" was created, which defined cyberbullying as bullying-type behaviour that is committed through the use of the Internet and new technologies, where either a person or a group of people launch offensive attacks or humiliate another person (Apav, [https://apav.pt/apav\\_v3/index.php/pt/](https://apav.pt/apav_v3/index.php/pt/)).

In *Greece*, people who have been the target of harassment based on national origin, colour, religion, disability, sexual orientation or so on can file a complaint. Moreover, victims have the possibility to complain directly about criminal behaviour in cyberspace. In addition, through the SafeLife platform, child sexual abuse material is removed from the internet, working with schools, police, internet service providers and so on (Safeline). Regarding the definition of the term "cyberbullying", it has not been enshrined in Greek law, but Article 312 of the Criminal Code mentions and includes the issue of bullying. Thus, it mentions the need for the continuous nature of actions affecting the physical or mental health of a person, similar to the legislation of other countries.

Since 2010, *Lithuania* has adopted a law aimed at protecting minors from information that may have negative effects on them. Thus, the criteria for public information, those that could cause physical, mental, or moral harm to the development of minors, the procedure for making it available to the public and its dissemination, as well as the rights, obligations, and liability of producers (Better Internet for Kids) have been precisely established. In addition, in 2020, as social realities have required a change of perspective, the Lithuanian legislature decided

to adopt a law aimed at protecting children’s rights on the Internet, so that the principles underlying the protection of children’s rights and freedoms have been established, which are in line with constitutional provisions.

In *Turkey*, both cyberbullying and sending e-mails with viruses are punishable by criminal law. Even the criminal code stipulates that the committing of actions resulting in murder, torture, threats, discrimination, disturbance of peace and quiet, insults, violation of confidentiality, and so on are criminal offences and are punishable according to the legal provisions.

In fact, in a study carried out in Uzbekistan, the differences in legal perspective were very well highlighted in the following table. (Tagaymuratovna).

**Table 1.** Adapted and updated from Tagaymuratovna, P.D. “Cyberbullying as a socio-psychological problem and legal ways to solve it abroad”

| No | State name                                | Cyberbullying legislation  | Note   |
|----|---|--|--|
| 1. | In the U.S. Federal Administration System | When it comes to cyberbullying legislation, the U.S. federal administration system and state legislation are different | A bill has been drafted at the federal level under the name of 13-year-old student Megan Maer in response to her tragic suicide on April 2, 2019, after a cyberbullying incident. The law is called the Megan Maer Cyber Attack Prevention Act. The bill has been widely discussed in Congress but not adopted at the federal level. The main reason for this is that the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution included an article on freedom of speech. |
| 2. | At the U.S. state level                   | New Jersey has a Revenge-Porn Laws Act   | Designed to prevent the distribution of personal photos, movies, nude or sexually explicit photos of teenagers without their permission.   |
| 3. | At the U.S. state level                   | Arkansas, Louisiana, and North Carolina have criminal charges against cyberbullying                                    | In North Carolina, cyberbullying is punishable by a fine of \$ 500 to \$ 1,000 or up to 6 months in prison.  |
| 4. | Canada                                    | There are civil and criminal penalties for cyberbullying   | Almost all provinces have cyberbullying legislation.   |
| 5. | Albania                                   | There is a law on cyberbullying  | It was first adopted in 2010   |
| 6. | South Korea                               | There is a law on cyberbullying  | Cyberbullying is a crime   |

| No  | State name  | Cyberbullying legislation  | Note   |
|-----|---|--|--|
| 7.  | Singapore   | There is a law on cyberbullying                                  | Approved and adopted in the first reading in Parliament on March 3, 2014   |
| 8.  | Australia.<br>In the federal system of government | There is no law on cyberbullying                                 | In recent years, the imposition of criminal liability for cyberbullying in Australia has been the subject of widespread debate. According to MP Paul Fletcher, the continuation of sanctions in practice, a system of civil liability, should be developed in consultation with the federal states   |
| 9.  | Australia. at the state level                     | New South Wales has a law criminalizing cyberbullying in schools | Criminal liability for cyberbullying applies only when committed against individuals. These regulations also sought to cover all forms of cyberbullying in society   |
| 10. | United Kingdom                                    | There is no law on cyberbullying                                 | Instead, one of the following laws may apply in individual cases:1997 Arrest Act, 1986 Public Order Act, 1988 Malicious Communication Act 2003 Communication Act (SA)  |
| 11. | Switzerland                                       | There is no law on cyberbullying.                                | In Switzerland, there are penalties for offenses under the Criminal Code. In addition, in case of personal injury, legal action can be taken under Article 28 of the Civil Code  |
| 12. | Spain   | There is no law on cyberbullying                                 | There are penalties applicable under criminal law.   |
| 13. | Italy   | Until 2013, there was no Cyberbullying Act.                      | Following the suicide of a 14-year-old girl due to cyberbullying in January 2013, appropriate measures against cyberbullying were discussed to end the violence on social media. In January 2014, the Italian Minister of Economic Development presented a draft Code of Ethics against cyber-attacks, which sets out measures to combat cyber-attacks |
| 14. | France  | There is no law on cyberbullying                                 | Articles 222-33-2 of the French Criminal Code defines “du harcèlement moral”.  |

| No  | State name | Cyberbullying legislation  | Note   |
|-----|------------|--|--|
| 15. | Belgium    | There is no law to regulate cyberbullying                          | Article 145 of the Law of 13 June 2015 contains several regulations concerning the conduct of persons on the internet. There are also several provisions in the Criminal Code dealing with harassment. |
| 16. | Romania    | There is no law to regulate cyberbullying                          | Several provisions of the New Criminal Code can be applied to establish conduct that is illegal in cyberspace.   |
| 17. | Portugal   | There is no law to regulate cyberbullying                          | However, there are a few provisions that sanction certain acts committed on the internet   |
| 18. | Japan      | There is a law that regulates cyberbullying issues very thoroughly | Cyber insults punishable under Japanese law  |

### Cyberbullying in school environment

Schools should always openly declare that cyberbullying is not an acceptable act and must established strict rules regarding this phenomenon. The statistical data registered in many countries showed that it is a small percentage of students that report cyberbullying acts to teachers, among the reasons being the unfair reactions of school staff to such incidents.

Cyberbullying has important consequences on quality of mental and physical life of students and one of the most important is the suicide attempt. In his book, Marzano (2019) presented two famous cases: the first one occurred in 2006 – of Lori Drew related to the suicide of Megan Meier. In case of Dori Drew - the mother who helped her daughter to create the false account used to cheat and hurt the thirteen-year-old Megan Meier, the victim committed suicide. It is important to mention that all attempts to incriminate Dori Drew failed but this case continues to be presented as a classic example of cyberbullying.

The second case analysed by Marzano occurred in Italy – of Tiziana Cantone whose suicide occurred 10 years later. In fact, this case was not a true cyberbullying one, but the huge emotional reaction in media and the debates among Italian citizens led to the implementation of the Italian law against cyberbullying in 2017. The law regulated the acts such as unsolicited sharing of compromising erotic pictures or video (*revenge porn acts*).

In last decade, since the awareness of the increasing of cyberbullying phenomenon, a variety of programs and policies have been developed and implemented in schools in order to teach students how to prevent cyberbullying and how to act in case of victimization. Compared to traditional bullying, the fight against cyberbullying is more insidious because it is difficult to identify the

aggressor and to look for bystanders' support. It is true that cyberbullying is happening out of school environment, but teachers remain one of the most important keys in fighting against cyberbullying due to the fact that – as all researches in this field are presenting – victims are more prone to share incidents with peers (friends and colleagues in school) than adults.

As a part of education, cyberbullying prevention training must inform students and parents how to act in case aggressive behaviours, traditional or online. (Campbell and Zavrnsnik, 2019)

## Conclusions

The development of the Internet has caused a wide range of problems for the IT society, such as spam, identity theft, viruses, infringement of intellectual property rights, domain names, infrastructure problems regarding access and interconnection (Moise, 2015). Moreover, in recent years, as young children are vulnerable targets, bullying in cyberspace has seen a remarkable increase, leading to the need for cooperation between parents and state authorities.

From a legislative point of view, the legislative and judicial challenge is to adopt a framework to regulate cyberbullying. Moreover, at a European level, the drafting of common legislation is difficult to achieve, as is proved by the lack of provisions in some EU Member States.

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