

An Exploratory Study on the Consequences for Young People of Cyberbullying - The New Form of Online Violence and Aggression

Arabela Briciu*, Victor-Alexandru Briciu, Eliza-Lorena Bortos

Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania

arabela.baican@unitbv.ro*

Abstract

Following Thomas's (2012) observations, the early 20th century was dominated by psychological and functionalist paradigms that theorised violence as a natural inclination of human beings or as a product of social conditions; however, more recent research has moved away from both evolutionary-biological and functionalist arguments and sought to situate violence in the context of regional, state and global economic and political systems. Today, online abuse and bullying show the negative side of absence, invisibility and control, the factors that make the victim more vulnerable. It is pervasive, subtle, often uncontrollable and therefore particularly stressful violence. Bullying and cyberbullying are common in society and are caused by people who want to intentionally harm others without thinking about the consequences. In this context, parents and teachers are concerned about the effects and possible consequences of using the virtual environment on the personality, emotional and cognitive life of children. The present quantitative and exploratory research based on a questionnaire aims to identify the degree of influence of cyberbullying on the individuals surveyed, the main reasons for triggering aggressive behaviour in the virtual environment and to find solutions for how to manage the effects of cyberbullying attacks. The conclusions of the study are relevant since the online environment occupies an important place in people's routines, so that, bullying has made a transition from the real environment to the virtual one turning into cyberbullying.

Keywords: *Aggression, Bullying, Cyberbullying, Online Environment, Violence*

1. Introduction and Research Problem

In its basic sense, aggression involves at least two people, an aggressor, and a victim. Violence generally refers to injuring, killing, and destruction but also includes illegal and unlawful actions intended to harm others. The term bullying is defined as an intentional act or behaviour of aggression carried out repeatedly over a long period by an individual/group with the victim unable to defend himself or herself (Falla, Dueñas-Casado & Ortega-Ruiz, 2023; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). Bullying which is part of the broad class of aggressive behaviour can occur at least once in a person's lifetime and can take different forms depending on age. The characteristics by which it is defined are intentionality, persistence and power imbalance (Patrizi & Biasi, 2017). Intentionality means that the behavioural abuse is carried out consciously and voluntarily by the aggressor (bully) with the specific intent to cause harm to the victim. Persistence indicates that the offending actions are not sporadic or isolated, but are repeated over time, having a continuous character. Both the elements characterise aggressor's behaviour while the power imbalance symbolised in the situation underlies an asymmetry in the relationship that derives from a different physical strength or greater social, familial or intellectual prestige.

In general, three types of aggressive behaviour overlaid with direct and indirect ways in which bullying behaviours occur can be identified such as physical, verbal, and relational aggression. Physical aggression includes bodily harm; verbal aggression is the most common modality and manifests itself through threats, insults, and mockery; and relational aggression which is more subtle and difficult to detect, is applied through negative words,

gossip, psychological violence, and social marginalization (Li et al., 2021; Menesini, 2000, cited in Patrizi & Biasi, 2017: 11).

Violence and aggression are easy to spot, especially when people's behaviour changes. As early as primary school, teachers strive to prevent and combat stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, and opt for the development of autonomous thinking to give children security and ease of adjustment. Children from a young age can form the feeling that they cannot adapt to and/or fit into society; thus, they become internalised which can later lead to frustrations that they try to eliminate the feeling by harming others in turn when they grow up (Iannaco, 2020).

Adolescence is a difficult time since new physical and mental needs are born during that time and with them the family balance changes. Conflicts with parents become the order of the day. Children struggle to recognise, process and control their emotions and therefore to show their independence from the rules imposed by their parents. The period of adolescence represents the interruption of unproblematic growth, which resembles a variety of other emotional and structural disturbances (Frigioiu, 2009, p. 54).

Several risk factors can lead the adolescent to become violent towards parents, for example, dysfunctional communication in the family; guilt-based parenting; denigration; exasperated coercion and physical punishment; frequent exposure to family disputes (especially if violent); low socio-economic status of the family; poor emotional management; growing up with parents whose authority is not recognised; and the age difference for which intergenerational conflict erupts. The development of aggression

is rooted in dysfunctional family dynamics. Aggressive actions that occur in adolescence undertake a priority relational value aiming to make the individual assume an identity, a role and a position within the group. Early interventions can therefore make a difference. Encouraging children, communicating effectively with them from an early age and asking for specialised help (psychologists or psychotherapists) when necessary can reinforce preventive action against possible family conflicts. The changes that teenagers go through can influence the way they think, so that they feel alone and misunderstood by those around them, especially their parents, and may end up retreating to their rooms, certain environments or activities such as video games. Teens aged 13-18 use online social networking sites for various activities such as communicating with friends, hanging out, learning things outside of school, and boosting confidence when they are demoralised (Lichy et al., 2023; Seo et al., 2013 cited in Alim, 2016: 68-69).

2. Research Methodology

In this study, the authors present an exploratory investigation into the impact of aggression and violence on adolescents within virtual environments. The virtual environment, in this context, serves as a space where individuals can experience feelings of comprehension, satisfaction, and reassurance, particularly when engaging with like-minded communities. However, it is noteworthy that the virtual environment may also introduce adverse occurrences, such as instances of online harassment into individuals' lives. Thus, the research questions are: (1) How does cyberbullying affect users in their teenage years? (2) What are the main reasons for aggressive behaviour

to get triggered in the virtual environment? (3) How do users deal with their feelings and psyche after experiencing cyberbullying?

A survey methodology was employed to undertake the quantitative research. This research method involved the distribution of an online questionnaire, which was administered to a sample size of 243 participants in May 2021. The survey was aimed at the broader public, with a particular focus on individuals who had experienced cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime during adolescence, specifically up to the age of 18. The study encompassed respondents from diverse geographic backgrounds, including both urban and rural areas. It is important to note that all participants in this study, all of whom were aged 18 or older, were assured of their anonymity during the research. Their participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and strict measures were implemented to maintain the confidentiality of the data collected. All the responses provided by participants were exclusively utilised for statistical interpretation and were not disclosed or used for any other purpose.

3. Objectives of the Study

Exploring the research questions defined above, the present study aims to evaluate the virtual environment as a place where the desire to dominate and humiliate the public is born, later leading to violence and aggression. Thus, the research objectives are: (1) To examine the impact of cyberbullying on adolescents during their teenage years, (2) To explore the underlying factors leading to aggressive behaviour in virtual environments, and (3) To

investigate coping mechanisms used by individuals following to experiencing cyberbullying.

Different forms of virtual harassment and their effects on humanity, especially on the adolescent are identified. In the last decade, social media has become a ubiquitous mode of communication (Briciu, Mircea, Briciu, 2020) for all young people, and it is important to take a closer look at their vulnerability (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013). The age of adolescence, news viewing, video gaming, and social media use can negatively impact children. They can become desensitised to violence, which is the most serious outcome, and if a new generation grows up with the idea that violence is something positive and accepted in society, it will tend to continue to practice violence.

4. Scope and Significance of the Study

The reason for choosing this research topic is its significance which stems from the fact that the most vulnerable age group is those under 18, and minors tend to trust even people with whom they are just coming into contact online. This category is the most easily influenced; thus, the effects of cyberbullying can have negative consequences on young users. Young people who are victims of virtual bullying are more prone to naivety, emotional distress, low self-esteem, depression, social isolation, anxiety, decreased life satisfaction, as well as poor academic performance, school absenteeism and suicidal ideation (Larrañaga, Yubero, & Navarro, 2018).

Ultimately, this research will help us find out how victims are affected during adolescence, why people resort to online violence, and how they manage their emotions and thoughts.

5. Review of the Literature

Virtual bullying is a phenomenon (Pordeus, Mesquita & Pordeus, 2022) of which the social seriousness goes far beyond the drama it evokes and the numerous cases that the media bring to the public's attention daily. People's violent behaviour can be traced back to the widespread regression of respect for one another coupled with the almost total absence of emotional education in the family and/or at school, with no recognition and management of emotions. The term "cyberbullying" is only used in cases where the victims are children or teenagers, and in the case of adults terms such as "cyber-harassment" or "cyberstalking" are used (Alismaiel, 2023); nevertheless, people use "cyberbullying" in a general way (Kizza, 2023; Dobre & Enăchescu, 2016: 103). The cases of cyberbullying prove the constant lack of structuring a good social relationship showing how people have not developed the ability to speak and interact; to express and respect the emotions of others; to be empathetic; and to establish a balanced development. " Emergence of unethical practices in social media in recent years has been noticed due to insufficient regulation or lack of control/sanctions for rule violations" (Cismaru, 2015: 183). According to Barkus (2017), cyberbullying was brought into the mainstream after online bullying led to multiple suicides among teenagers. One of the first cases occurred in 2007, when Tina Meier, a 13-year-old teenager, committed

suicide after neighbours created a fake profile on the social network 'Myspace' under the name "Josh Evans" to harass her. Meier's case sparked controversy in Missouri which is the point that triggered the passage of anti-bullying laws, including anti-cyberbullying.

Willard (2004) made a classification of online bullying and divided it into eight specific types of behaviour (cited in Patrizi & Biasi, 2017: 26-28). The first specific type is "Flaming", which refers to the sending of vulgar and aggressive online messages as well as malicious insults to a person through online groups, emails, forums, and social networks and is designed to "inflare" the emotions and mood of the victims. The second type is "Online harassment", which is the sending of unsolicited offensive messages intended to annoy, alarm or abuse others. The third specific type is "Cyberstalking", which defines repeated harassment through threats, false accusations, defamation, slander, identity theft, and sexual language. The next type is "Denigration", which refers to the publication of bad and false rumours about the victim to denigrate their reputation and to socially isolate them. It manifests itself through online dissemination which includes distributing or posting gossip or rumours about a person whose reputation or interpersonal relationships could be damaged. This form of cyberbullying is committed without the victim's knowledge, and they are often made aware of these actions by people close to them. The fifth type is characterised by "Masquerade"/ "Impersonation" and is the appropriation and theft of the victim's identity to damage their reputation. The perpetrator damages the victim's self-image by what they post publicly. "Outing" is the sixth type and is about publicly revealing personal and confidential information about

a person so that many people in cyberspace can see it. The penultimate type is "Exclusion", which is the intentional exclusion of a person from an online group. Exclusion usually takes place in a chat conversation within a group. The last specific type of behaviour is "Trickery" and it means intentionally deceiving or defrauding a person. Trickery is similar to Outing in that the perpetrator tricks the victim into revealing personal or embarrassing information through their naivety and then sharing it with others online (Aune, 2009, p. 7).

6. Results and Findings

Cyberbullying can occur anywhere in the world including the online environment, especially on social networks where personal data/information and photos are visible to anyone. It's all too obvious that online presence can be a risk that can influence people's decisions about whether or not to engage in cyberbullying.

The quantitative research was carried out using the questionnaire since the research instrument includes three parts containing a total of 31 questions. The first part is constructed from a series of questions about respondents' opinions on the reasons people resort to cyberbullying, the most likely encountered sources and mediums in it, and the best way to punish them. The second part of the questionnaire directly addressed people who have experienced and been at least once in their lives a victim of cyberbullying. The third part of the questionnaire contains socio-demographic identification questions.

Thus, regarding the first research question on how users are affected during adolescence by online bullying, the results show that the effects of online bullying often have negative effects that are psychological rather than physical.

In terms of the most vulnerable ages at which individuals can be cyberbullied, 62.6% (n=152) of respondents have considered the most vulnerable age group to be between 14 and 18; 27.6% (n=67) selected the age group under 14; 4.5% (n=11) chose the age group 19-24; 3.3% (n=8) considered the age group 25-35, and only 2.10% (n=1) chose the age group over 36.

The percentage of respondents on their answers for the consequences of cyberbullying are as follows. 55.6% (n=135) selected *Sudden behaviour change*; 75.7% (n=184) chose *Decreased self-confidence*; 46.9% (n=114) responded *Suicide*; 58% (n=141) responded *Social distancing*; 74.9% (n=182) selected *Negative self-perception*; 3.3% (n=8) said *I don't know/I don't answer*, and (n=1) responded *Other*.

The effects can also be compounded by the changes that adolescence brings. If early changes in teenagers' behaviour are not reported at that time, they can worsen into health and life-threatening effects. When they do not feel understood, especially by their parents, teenagers tend not to communicate about their problems, believing that they will be punished for what is happening to them. The peak of stress occurs when young people are asked for material goods, money, or favours to keep themselves and their families safe. They would stop communicating as much as they used to, distance

themselves from family and friends, lose confidence in themselves and the people around them, and become introverted, anxious, depressed, and suicidal.

Regarding the percentage of people who have been a victim of online harassment at least once in their lives, out of a total of 243 people, 78 (32.1%) answered *No* while 165 (67.9%) answered *Yes*. This shows that almost half of the total number of respondents have been victims of cyberbullying.

When asked about the age that the respondents were at the time of the harassment, to understand the most vulnerable age group, the following results were obtained: 95% (n=76) belonged to the 14-18 age category, 3.7% (n=3) to the 18-35 age category and 1.2% (n=1) to the over 36 age category. These results show that the age group most susceptible to virtual attacks is the under-18 age group.

As for the second research question, the study shows the main reasons for people's bullying behaviour. Dissatisfactions, frustrations, and annoyances that people experience in certain situations and aspects of their lives can cause people to change their behaviour. At the same time, inadequate childhood upbringing, traumatic experiences that have had a serious emotional impact, and the opinions and words of people around them can be triggers for objective manifestations of bullying. Frustration caused by certain failures in life, material possessions they could not afford, envying other people's lifestyles or successes, the desire for revenge on innocent people because of failures or unpleasant events, lack of affection within the

family or the absence of a parent/s are obvious reasons confirming this outcome.

Finally, regarding the third research question on how users manage their feelings and psyche after the experience, the results show that people can cope more easily with problems when they have a known outcome. In this sense, the fact that teenagers find a solution to a problem that has affected them with the help of parents, friends, police, accredited organisations, etc., may lead them to become more self-confident and more cautious in the activities they carry out when surfing the Internet. Through support from family and trusted people, specialised therapy and help from psychologists, punishment for the offender, or even in extreme cases a change of residence by leaving the town where they were born and raised, teenagers will be able to redefine their mental balance. The need to discover, socialise, make friends, form long-term relationships with someone of a similar age, feel part of a community, and be in line with other young people in their entourage are completely normal for adolescents. However, they should be constantly and consciously supervised by their parents but not exaggeratively. Parents need to be actively involved in discovering and getting to know their children's passions, activities, and friendships while also giving them the necessary amount of privacy. Further, teachers should discuss this topical issue with students as an awareness-raising process to have the widest and most accurate impact in schools. Attention from governments to these global issues is a must in fighting against cyberbullying.

7. Conclusions

With the rise of social media (Briciu and Briciu, 2020), cyberbullying has also become a topical issue that has led to controversy about the consequences it can have on people, especially teenagers. Cyberbullying has become a complex phenomenon in recent years, due to the development of technology and the emergence of new online social networks, which teenagers frequent daily in order to create or maintain friendships. Teens occasionally think about how their online presence and the content associated with their name can affect their health, reputation, and life (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, & Zickuhr, 2011).

However, the results of this study also highlight the importance of nurturing and maintaining parent-adolescent relationships to deal with victimisation processes caused by online bullying. Open communication between parents and children is crucial for young people to easily overcome such problems that can put their mental health at risk. Global concern should focus on parental responsibility and their awareness of the daily risks their children face during their activities. Young individuals frequently remain oblivious to the adverse consequences of excessive internet usage. The age of digitisation is not one of safety but has brought many problems that have raised questions about the well-being of the population.

Among teenagers, parents need to pay attention to their children's activities and friendship circles. As they get older, children tend to change their behaviour towards others. As far as possible, parents should try to adopt from their children's activities, create a close relationship with them, have

common topics of discussion, especially with those who are in their teens and are attracted by computers, smartphones, tablets, TV. Parents should also pay more attention to their own habits and activities. They should not only set a good example, but also be cautious in the activity they do when their children are around.

In the future, studies could also focus on the age of the aggressor to find out at what age people are more likely to become cyberbullies. Studies could also focus on the year of occurrence to keep track of the number of such cases each year at a statistical level; the online environment involves updates or changes to security methods and protection of users and personal data, so it may be possible to find out in which years the security system has been more secure or weaker compared to other years.

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