

## CYBERBULLYING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

**Cosmin-Constantin SICREA**

Ph.D. Student, Doctoral School of Social Sciences and Humanities,  
University of Craiova (Romania), E-mail: [cosmin\\_sicrea2005@yahoo.com](mailto:cosmin_sicrea2005@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** *The cyberbullying phenomenon is increasingly present online, especially on social networks. With a relatively young history, the psycho-social implications on cyberbullying victims are becoming increasingly evident in contemporary society. The risks of exposure to cyberbullying increase with the exposure of young people to the online environment. Although it is more common among teenagers and young people, the risk of cyberbullying of adults by distributing compromising content that could put the victim in a negative light cannot be excluded. In the absence of legal mechanisms at the European level meant to limit the phenomenon, the only effective method of prevention remains parental control by monitoring online traffic and the contents that children and adolescents access from electronic devices (tablet, phone, computer), and reporting to the police any attempts to cyber bully adults. Not infrequently, the conflict situations resulting from cyberbullying end up manifesting in the real life of the aggrieved person. The aggressor often crosses a fine line from deviant behaviour to delinquent behaviour by threatening or blackmailing the victims. Stakeholders in the field of cyberbullying prevention are most often represented by non-governmental organizations, which, however, are outnumbered by the phenomenon, especially since the police arrive late to intervene in such cases. Victims, out of fear, often end up hiding their situation from family, friends and the police.*

**Keywords:** deviance, cyberbullying, vulnerability, social media, online

### **1. Conceptual delimitations, general considerations**

In recent years, the term that refers to cyberbullying has been increasingly used, especially in the media, becoming associated with the phenomenon of suicides among young people and teenagers. Until 2010, specialized studies highlighted the fact that there was no direct link referring to cyberbullying before 2004, a fact that reminds us of a relatively young phenomenon studied by specialists. There is no universally accepted definition, however, most definitions describe a *systematically repeated activity that is carried out by electronic means with the intention of causing psychological or somatic suffering* (Peebles, 2014).

A common definition of aggression involves a systematic and repetitive exposure over time to negative actions on the abused person. In order to be able to use the term harassment and aggression, there must be a relationship characterized by a power imbalance between the aggressor and the person attacked (Olweus & Limber, 2018: 5). Cyberbullying is increasingly recognized as a serious public health problem affecting both adolescents and children. Most of the time, existing studies have focused on the national or local effects of cyberbullying, with the global perspective being less addressed (Zhu, 2021).

Cyberbullying is defined by Smith as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or a person using electronic means of contact, repeatedly directed against a victim who becomes vulnerable in the online environment (Sathyanarayana Rao et. al, 2018).

The development of social networks and the dissemination of private content have brought to the fore a problem that society has faced for decades. The progress of technology is often equated with the progress of human societies. New technologies such as the Internet have radically changed the way people interact. Although these developments have allowed human race to make great progress in many areas, they have also allowed the perpetuation of various forms of distance aggression (Donegan, 2012: 34). Bullying is by no means a new phenomenon, is not characteristic only to our days, having a historical origin. For example, in Christianity, the Bible is full of references that highlight different forms of violence or even aggression. Specific biblical examples include episodes such as the rivalry between Cain and Abel, the rivalry

between Joseph and his brothers, the fight between David and Goliath or the parable of the good Samaritan. Christians were harassed and persecuted in the Roman Colosseum by Saul, an avowed persecutor of the early Christian Church (Allanson et al. 2015: 31). Nowadays cyberbullying is spread through digital devices, which means that bullying most often takes place outside school, while traditional bullying is commonly found inside school. Most of the time cyber aggressions are characterized by a "power" obtained by the aggressor in the digital environment due to its anonymous character. Victims of cyberbullying end up feeling threatened even in the comfort of home, while in traditional (school) bullying this is not possible (Englander, 2017).

Although the phenomenon is at the confluence of technology and medicine, scientific literature has been present since the 2000s, quite late compared to other studied phenomena (Aboujaoude, 2015: 11).

## 2. Methodology

The article has two main components:

**a) The theoretical section** aims to explain concepts such as bullying, cyberbullying, in a general, historical, evolutionary context.

**b) The practical, applied section** aims to analyse the existing specialized literature in a context of the effects of cyberbullying on the integrity and safety of the victimized person as a long-term phenomenon with multiple implications.

## c) Conclusions

### 3. The cyber bully, deviant or delinquent?

When we talk about cyberbullying, we generally have two well-defined positions: that of the aggressor and that of the victim. Taking into account the complexity of the phenomenon in question, it is absolutely necessary to ask ourselves questions about the aggressor's behaviour in the online environment. A question inevitably arises *"Does the aggressor exhibit a deviant behaviour, or is he or she a delinquent?"*

The sociology of deviance faces two basic and interrelated problems: *How and why do certain people engage in deviant acts?* The significance of these two issues, the nature of the theories and research surrounding them, and their implications for the future direction of the sociology of deviance are explored. The goal is not to look at social definitions or deviant behaviour separately, but rather to consider both situations in the aggregate, to specify the interaction and to integrate explanations of social behaviour (Akers, 1968). There is much confusion about what this fine line means, namely deviant versus delinquent behaviour.

The links between criminality, control and rules have been explored since the 1960s and 1970s by functionalists. A society's symbolic boundaries were thought to emerge in the control of deviance, of traits that take shape in the dialectic between law enforcers and law-breakers, insiders and outsiders, us and the others. Deviants provided symbols of contrasts and antitheses that revealed the form and structure of society, namely capitalists defining communists; radicals defining moderates; the poor defining the rich; the unrespectable defining the respectable; and homosexuals defining heterosexuals (Rock, 1998: 586). One of the fundamental notions in the initial development of the sociological study of delinquency was the notion that "delinquency is a group phenomenon," that is, delinquent behaviour involves groups of teenagers in general. This "group premise" was actually one of the major justifications for sociological claims in the field. Moreover, the most popular theoretical works on delinquency since the mid-1960s have studied "gangs" and "delinquent subcultures" or "countercultures" as the primary unit of analysis (Erickson & Jensen, 1977). However, deviance is defined and applied as a cultural representation. At the levels of individual concepts and broader postmodern theories of deviance, it focuses on a social construct (Adler, 2006: 131-132).

In recent years, there has been a significant change in the conception of deviant behaviour and deviant people in general. Prior to what is designated as a new perspective, it was commonly assumed that there was something inherent in deviants that distinguished them from non-deviants. Thus, from Lombroso to Sheldon, criminals were viewed as biologically and somatically different. After decades of research, no biological characteristics have been discovered that distinguish criminals from the rest of the population. Therefore, few theorists now even entertain the idea that all criminals have mental deficiencies and constitutional alterations. The forging of an analytical identity of criminality continued in Sellin's proposal to abandon legal criteria altogether in favour of norms of conduct. This is because laws vary and can be arbitrary in any society, a purely legal definition of criminality is not adequate in this context. All the more so as the criminal scope varies from one society to another, just as in the case of the norms of conduct (Gibbs, 1966: 9-10).

So, we can issue a first answer regarding our question: *"Does the aggressor have a deviant behaviour, or is he or she a delinquent?"* In essence, the cyber aggressor can have both deviant and delinquent behaviour depending on the severity of the actions they initiate in the online environment and the existing legal norms. There are situations where the absence of legal rule in a certain state "transforms" the cyber aggressor from a dangerous delinquent into a simple "non-integrated" individual with deviant behaviours.

#### **4. Effects of cyberbullying on victims**

Cyberbullying ends up having a significant negative impact on both the victims and the victims who become bullies in their turn. Depression, insecurity, anger, worry, shame or low self-esteem are just some of the problems encountered among people subjected to cyberbullying (Völlink, 2012, p. 8). Victims of cyberbullying experience a variety of emotional experiences that may lead to an increase in emotional distress (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). So the effects of bullying are felt both psychologically and somatically through stomach aches, headaches, sleep disorders, muscle pain, weight loss and other physical ailments. They end up being a biological response to stressors. There are also specific characteristics associated with intimidating episodes that over time have an increased emotional impact on mental health (Aluede, 2008). When the body fears to be in danger, it releases hormones that inspire it to either fight or flee. This type of response can cause long-term suffering for the cyberbullying victim. Parents should be able to notice these changes in their children's behaviour even if the changes are subtle or not shared with the family (<https://www.webpurify.com/blog/cyberbullying-statistics/>). Nearly half (46%) of 13- to 17-year-olds have been bullied physically or online, and physical appearance is a relatively common reason (Pew Research, Dec. 15, 2022 [https://enough.org/stats\\_cyberbullying](https://enough.org/stats_cyberbullying)).

On the other hand, the high level of anonymity in text-based chat communication increases the chances of teenagers becoming victims of aggressive actions due to the fact that conversation participants are able to "talk" anonymously without revealing their true identity or real physical characteristics (Katzner et al. 2009: 26). According to a 2019 study conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), around 27% of young people aged between 15 and 29 in the European Union experienced some form of cyberbullying between 2014 and 2019. Whereas the prevalence of cyberbullying is similar for women and men, the data is very different for sexual harassment, with a much higher percentage of women being affected. The percentages also increase when the victim is part of a minority (disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.). The European Union Member States with the highest number of registered cases of cyberbullying are the Netherlands, Germany and France. A meta-analysis of studies and surveys conducted in Europe specifically referring to cyberbullying found that Poland has the highest incidence at 31.5 % of the global average, followed by the Czech Republic at 18.6% and Romania at 15.4% (The European Christian Political Movement). Of course, we must not fall into the "trap" of cold statistics regarding the phenomenon only through the lens of numbers, as it is necessary to have a discernment of its complexity, taking into account the

fact that most of the time the victims are not only the persons directly involved but also their family. For this reason, precisely certain approaches forwarded by authors such as Olweus, Espelage and Hong emphasize the need to integrate interventions aimed at direct traditional violence against the person with preventive measures aimed at their cyberbullying (Pyżalski et al, 2022). Even though common forms of cyberbullying involve the use of mobile phones (bullying via phone calls, text messages, bullying with pictures/videos, including so-called "happy slapping") or the use of the Internet (bullying via emails, chat room, instant messaging and on websites, including blogs), should not be seen as an activity that does not endanger the integrity of the harassed person, and it is more than necessary to report these situations to the police (Ferrara, Ianniello, Villani, et al. 2018).

Cyberbullying remains a major problem and most of the time such behaviours are difficult to control especially as this activity is carried out on fake accounts with pseudonyms and poor localization. Police often report a lack of clear guidance, training and support enabling them to understand and properly address this behaviour (Patchin, 2013). Many questions remain unanswered about the appropriate balance between accountability, prevention, and addressing cyberbullying for all its stakeholders (e.g. parents, schools, law enforcement, etc.). An "attractive" form of cyberbullying is increasingly present in the online environment in the form of challenges that the victim must "pass". Thus, the aggressor ends up putting the victim's life in danger from a distance without the victim realizing it, especially in the case of children and teenagers. For instance, "Blackout Challenge" is increasingly present in the online environment, having gone viral on social networks, along with the Tide Pod Challenge and the Benadryl overdose trend (Gulf News Report, 2018). Through the blackout online "game", children around the world have suffocated themselves with household items until they passed out, "filming the adrenaline rush" they had after partially regaining consciousness by posting the videos on social media. These games are a modern adaptation of past challenges to the idea of suffocation that has existed for decades in society and now ends up being "delivered" to young children through social media ignoring the risk of death they are subject to (Carville, 2022). Another fairly common situation is when the aggressor collects data from the victim, potentially compromising personal data with the aim of obtaining benefits later. So, the aggressor ends up practically blackmailing the victim until the latter gives in and follows the instructions exactly. Studies of female rape confirm the tendency of others to judge victims as responsible—or partially responsible—for their experiences of sexual, physical, or virtual (online) violence. Such preconceptions can be understood using a theoretical framework highlighted by the attribution theory described by Heider in 1958. It explains how people use logic, the way they feel in interpreting certain events in their lives. So, a person behaves in a certain way because of a situation or another person (Zhong, 2020: 3).

In relation to online sexual assaults, 4 main categories of aggressors are described. First, experienced offenders generally have multiple victims, systematically chosen based on particular characteristics. They meet their victims on the Internet and in the first instance build a relationship with them in the virtual environment before having an actual meeting in real life. Experienced criminals generally use an ideal virtual identity. The second type is represented by cynical abusers, who have contact with one or more victims, whom they previously knew in real life. Their relationship with their victims is generally reciprocal, meaning the child or adolescent willingly interacts with the abuser. The experience level of the abuser is considered medium and is generally characterized by excessive affection manifested in the virtual environment in order to later create an attachment relationship in the real world. The third category is represented by the emotional abusers who show strong attachment to the victim, showing feelings of love and affection. They are considered to have a low level of experience and generally have a demeaning behaviour. The fourth type described is that of sex offenders. Similar to romantic offenders, they use their own identity and meet their victims online to develop a possible offline relationship. They are distinguished from emotional abusers by their motivation to have sex without emotional or attachment implications. Their relationships are

generally short and mutual. Such persons do not specifically target children or adolescents, but will engage in a relationship with a minor to satisfy their sexual desires. This type of aggressors has a low level of experience in stalking their victims (Paquette, Fortin & Perkins: 2020).

It should be highlighted that sexual cyberbullying does not always involve actual sexual contact. There are situations in which abusers establish friendships with recruited victims who end up voluntarily sending intimate content to the abuser. As a result of such practices, we are witnessing an increase in cases of child pornography on the Internet, through the sale of materials obtained from the victim to sites with pornographic content.

Regardless of which group we belong to (parents, teachers, psychologists, lawyers, etc.) the crime of cyberbullying continues to have an upward trend despite the prevention measures promoted by certain profile organizations. Identifying cyber bullies is difficult and sometimes too late, when the victim has already been traumatized or worse, killed. Parental control on the content and pages accessed by the child or teenager by establishing a relationship of trust with them remain among the few real ways to prevent the phenomenon among children and teenagers.

## 5. Conclusions

Cyberbullying remains by far a serious social issue both inside and outside school, irrespective of the bullied person's culture or background. Unlike "regular" bullying, online bullying takes place continuously without any real control over the bully. Most of the time the latter becomes "invisible" to the authorities, teachers or the victim's family. More frequently encountered in children and adolescents, the phenomenon should not be completely excluded from among adult victims. Research has shown a number of serious consequences of being a cyberbullying victim, consequences that can leave scars on the person or their family. We should not ignore the fact that there are situations where face-to-face bullying and online bullying may occur simultaneously. With the development of social networks and digital forums, comments, photos, posts and content shared by people may often be viewed and used by strangers or acquaintances of the victim. Cyberbullying behaviour has negative effects on both the victim and the bully. The negative effects increase along with the frequency, duration, and severity of cyberbullying. Victims who frequently experience cyberbullying may end up with a decreased academic performance, depression, anxiety, and negative externalizing behaviours, as well as an increased risk of suicide by engaging in certain "challenges" launched by the bully.

Parents play a crucial part in preventing cyberbullying and related harm. By monitoring the devices used by their children and establishing some rules for their interaction on social media platforms, they can protect them from cyberbullying. Parents should also learn the signs that may suggest their children are being cyberbullied, such as increased device use, anger or anxiety after using a device, or hiding devices when others are around.

Constant communication with children regarding cyberbullying is an important component in preventing the phenomenon. Cultivating an open dialogue about cyberbullying can encourage a child to report a potentially dangerous online situation to an adult. In conclusion, the question remains "What can the online environment turn you into?" Aggressor or victim?"

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