Perceptions and Challenges Regarding Cyberbullying during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The increased use of the Internet and digital communication platforms has facilitated the emergence and development of the phenomenon known in the literature as cyberbullying. This research aims to examine the perception of the interviewees about the phenomenon of cyberbullying in the period marked by the Covid 19 pandemic. In this research the method of sociological survey based on questionnaire was used. The research was attended by 541 people, mostly young people (83.5% of the interviewees are under 30 years old). The findings showed that the interviewees know to a large extent the phenomenon of cyberbullying; respondents believe that this phenomenon spread during the Covid 19 pandemic; half of those surveyed witnessed the phenomenon of cyberbullying, while 44.7% say they know people who have been victims of cyberbullying. The present study analyzes the way in which the interviewees position themselves in relation to different acts specific to cyberbullying. The study also highlights the opinions of the interviewees on effective action strategies to combat cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying; Covid-19; cyber-aggressor; cyber-victim; cyber-witness; internet.

1. Introduction

The exponential growth of virtual communications in the last decade has drastically changed the way individuals interact, often changing learning strategies, entertainment options. (Sonone et al., 2020). The rapid spread of social networks on the Internet, as well as the use of electronic communication tools such as email, websites, instant messaging, webcams, chat rooms, social networking sites, blogs and text messages (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) facilitated the exchange of information in various forms (text messages, graphics, audio-video, etc.) at any time of day or night, in real time.

The specific context generated by the Covid 19 pandemic has led to an increase in the use of communication technologies via the Internet in almost all areas of activity. The need for physical distance from others, as a measure to prevent infection with the Sars Cov 2 virus, has led to a rapid increase in the number of people who frequently use and own digital media.

2. Theoretical foundation

According to various dictionaries, the concept of cyberbullying refers to:

- “the use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.” (Oxford English Dictionary)
“the activity of using messages on social media, emails, text messages, etc. to frighten or upset somebody” (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) 
“the activity of using the internet to harm or frighten another person, especially by sending them unpleasant messages” (Cambridge Dictionary) 
“the act of harassing someone online by sending or posting mean messages, usually anonymously.” (Dictionary.com)

Among the most credible definitions of cyberbullying are those of Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell and Tippet (2008), who define cyberbullying as an aggressive act performed through the use of electronic means of communication, individual or group, repetitive and durable over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) state that cyberbullying causes intentional rather than episodic damage caused by the use of electronic means, “cyberbullies have some perceived or actual power over their victims” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, p.152).

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that takes place online. Thus, cyberbullying presents a series of elements common to the bullying phenomenon, such as intentionality, repetitiveness / persistence, power asymmetry. Between the two phenomena, bullying and cyberbullying, there are aspects that differentiate and nuance their specificity. If in bullying the aggressor's power was usually of a physical or social nature (competence or popularity), in cyberbullying the power can take the form of competence in the use of technology (digital competences), doubled by the possibility of access to technology and internet. “That is, youth who are able to navigate the electronic world and utilize technology in a way that allows them to harass others are in a position of power relative to a victim.” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, p.152).

Cyberbullying tends to be more severe than bullying. Unlike bullying, victims of cyberbullying cannot be physically removed, as electronic devices continuously notify and download content from social networks or various sites. (Tanrikulu, Kinay & Aricak, 2015). At the same time, cyberbullies feel less inhibited in communicating with potential victims through electronic devices (Suler, 2004).

Cyberbullying takes different forms, being difficult to capture the real dimension of this phenomenon, given the fact that not all acts of cyberbullying are reported, and accurate statistics on this phenomenon are difficult to achieve.

3. Research methodology

The research was conducted using the method of sociological survey, based on a questionnaire. All persons involved in the research completed the online questionnaire. The research tool (questionnaire) included 12 items, of which 9 items of content and 3 items of identification.

3.1. The aim and the objectives of the research

The aim of the research was to identify the perception of the interviewees regarding the phenomenon of cyberbullying in the period marked by the Covid 19 pandemic. The goal was achieved through the following objectives:

- SO1: knowing the degree of familiarity of respondents with the phenomenon of cyberbullying
- SO2: identifying the perception of the evolution of the phenomenon of cyberbullying among young people during the Covid19 pandemic;
- SO3: identification of the mode of participation (as a witness, aggressor, victim) or non-participation of respondents in various forms of cyberbullying;
- SO4: highlighting respondents' perception of the main reasons for a person to engage in specific actions of cyberbullying
- SO5: specifying possible strategies for action in cyberbullying

3.2. Research period

The research was conducted between March 2021 - June 2021.

3.3. Investigated population - sample structure

The research involved 541 people from western Romania (Caraş-Severin and Timiș counties) who have the following characteristics depending on:

- Age
  - under 14 years - 7 persons (1.3%)
  - between 15 years-20 years - 283 persons (52.3%)
  - between 21 years-25 years - 132 persons (24.4%)
  - between 26 years-30 years - 30 persons (5.5%)
  - over 30 years - 89 people (16.5%)
- Gender
  - Male - 161 persons (29.8%)
Female - 380 persons (70.2%)

- Area of residence
- Urban area - 341 persons (63%)
- Rural area - 200 persons (37%)

- Social status
- student in high school - 7 persons (1.3%)
- student in high school - 234 persons (43.3%)
- student (bachelor, master) - 216 persons (39.9%)
- employee - 70 persons (12.9%)
- unemployed, homemaker - 9 persons (1.7%)
- Others: - 5 persons (0.9 %)

4. Results

In the presentation and interpretation of the data we chose to structure them according to the research objectives:

- **SO1: knowing the degree of familiarity of the respondents with the phenomenon of cyberbullying**

To ensure that all respondents understand the term cyberbullying, a short description of this concept was introduced at the beginning of the questionnaire: "cyberbullying is a form of bullying aggression using digital technologies. It takes place on various sites that allow interaction through messages, on social networks, on message exchange platforms, game platforms and on mobile phones. Cyberbullying refers to intentional behavior, repeated in order to denigrate, scare, anger or humiliate those targeted.

![Figure 1. The degree of knowledge of the phenomenon of cyberbullying by research participants](image)

The survey of the respondents regarding the degree of knowledge of the cyberbullying phenomenon was done by using a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant Not at all, and 5 - very well. The results obtained are shown in the graph below. It is observed that a relatively small number of respondents (34 people, 6.3%) state that they do not know the phenomenon of cyberbullying, while at the opposite pole, 149 people (27.5%) consider that they know it very well.

Knowledge of a phenomenon such as cyberbullying indicates the extent to which respondents are informed about the existence of this phenomenon, the attention paid to understand its manifestation & its consequences. In our opinion, a high degree of knowledge of the phenomenon of cyberbullying implies the approach to its specificity, by assuming roles such as: cyber-aggressor, cyber-victim, cyber-witness. The data obtained from the following items confirm this hypothesis of ours.

- **O2: identifying the perception of the evolution of the phenomenon of cyberbullying among young people during the pandemic with Covid 19;**

  “The COVID-19 pandemic radically changed the context for bullying dynamics.” (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

The pre-pandemic literature with COVID 19 has reported the link between the increasing frequency of Internet use and the significant increase in cases of cyberbullying and cyber victimization among young people. (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, Lattanner 2014, Kowalski, Limber, McCord, 2019, Calvete et al., 2010).

Since March 2020, under the conditions of the Covid 19 pandemic, the excessive use of the Internet as a means of distance communication has allowed those with a tendency towards aggression to look for new ways of expression, in the shadow of the anonymity generously offered by the Internet. To date, few studies have looked at how reducing personal interactions and increasing communication through virtual technologies has impacted the phenomenon of bullying and cyberbullying. (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021)

Jain et al. (2020) found that online behaviors associated with an increased risk of cyberbullying increased during the pandemic. Studies that analyze online searches about the phenomenon of cyberbullying using search engines, note that “in spring 2020, when schools shifted to remote learning due to the pandemic, search for school bullying and cyberbullying both dropped about 30 - 40 %.” That drop is sustained through the subsequent 2020-21 school year, particularly in areas where more schools remained fully remote. (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021)
According to the participants in the research, the evolution of the phenomenon of cyberbullying in the last year (2020-2021) among young people:

- there was a significant reduction in the number of cases (24 persons, 4.4%)
- there was a slight decrease (26 persons, 4.8%)
- it remained at approximately the same level (63 persons, 11.6%)
- registered a slight increase (119 persons, 22%)
- registered a significant increase (201 persons, 37.2%)
- do not know (108 persons, 20%).

As can be seen from the data obtained most respondents consider that the phenomenon of cyberbullying is on the rise, which can be explained by the COVID 19 pandemic, when internet communication has grown exponentially, providing people with aggressive tendencies with the perfect environment to implement their ideas to intentionally hurt and repeated other people.

**SO3: identification of the mode of participation (as a witness, aggressor, victim) or non-participation of respondents in various forms of cyberbullying;**

Cyberbullying phenomenon involving three roles: aggressor (cyberbully), victims and witnesses (witnesses - part of the problem or witnesses - part of the solution). (Willard, 2007). According to UNICEF, "anyone can become a victim of cyberbullying" (https://www.unicef.org/romania/ro/pove%C8%99ti/cyberbullying-ce-este-%C8%99i-cum-%C3%AEi-punem-cap%C4%83t).

Research shows that “numerous adolescents repeatedly fall victim to bullying (cyberbullying)” (Katzer et al, 2009, p.32). The long-term consequences for victims can be very severe, including a higher likelihood of depression, anxiety, and drug abuse (Kowalski et al., 2014)

When asked if they know someone who was a victim of cyberbullying, 44.7% of the respondents (242 people) answered affirmatively, while 41.6% (225 people) answered negatively to this item, and 13.7% (74 people) have avoided giving an affirmative or a negative answer.

Knowing a person/victim of cyberbullying makes the phenomenon of cyberbullying not something abstract, but something related to the respondent through the person he/she knows. People who answered “yes” to this item found themselves in one of the situations: either they were the aggressors, or witnesses (direct or indirect - by telling the situation of cyberbullying by another person), or victims. Also, even among the people participating in the investigation, there is a good chance that some of the people who avoid giving an affirmative or negative answer are in the position of victims and / or aggressors and due to feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, anger, non-acceptance, etc. prefer neutral answers such as “I don't know / don't answer”.

![Figure 2. Results regarding the knowledge or not of a cyberbullying victim](image)

**Table 1. Results regarding the knowledge or not of a person victim of cyberbullying**

| Answers                        | Nr. of people | %  |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----|
| Yes                            | 242           | 44.7%|
| No                             | 225           | 41.6%|
| Don't know/ Don't answer       | 74            | 13.7%|

As we mentioned, the concept of “cyberbullying” (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2007) refers to the actions of posting comments, information, images, audio-video clips, etc. online that repeatedly and intentionally seek to offend, shame, frighten or denigrate someone by accessing that content by a wide audience. Often someone can unwittingly end up witnessing episodes of cyberbullying. In the present research we were interested to find out to what extent the research participants ever witnessed an episode of cyberbullying and how they would act if they found themselves in such a situation.

The responses received to the item if they have ever witnessed an episode of cyberbullying seem balanced, in the sense that almost half of the respondents say they were not witnesses (this does not
exclude the possibility that among those who say they were not witnesses there are people who participated in cyberbullying, but as cyber-aggressors or cyber-victims; obviously, among the respondents are also people who did not take part directly in cyberbullying either as witnesses or as victims or aggressors), while the other half also specifies the frequency with which the episodes of cyberbullying in which they took part as witnesses took place (most people took part only once or twice).

**Figure 3. Results on the number of people who witnessed cyberbullying**

![Pie chart showing the frequency of people who witnessed cyberbullying]

| Answers                        | Nr. of people | %  |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----|
| Never                          | 269           | 49.7% |
| Once or twice                  | 234           | 43.3% |
| 2-3 times a month              | 22            | 4.1% |
| Once a week                    | 2             | 0.4% |
| Multiple times a week          | 14            | 2.6% |

In order to identify the relationship that the respondents have with the phenomenon of cyberbullying, they were asked to specify the frequency (which varies from *Never* or *Only once or twice*, reaching up to *2-3 times a month* or *Once a week* or *From several times a week*) faced with certain situations (presented in the left column of the table below) in the sphere of the phenomenon of cyberbullying. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Analyzing carefully the table below we can see to what extent the research participants were victims (the first 10 statements aim at the role of victim), aggressors (the next eight statements present situations characteristic of cyberbullies) the answers obtained from the respondents indicate the variant *Never* or *Only once or twice* which shows that in their case we cannot talk about cyberbullying but rather isolated incidents. Those who have faced these situations several times a month or even a week have a high risk of being directly affected by cyberbullying, respectively being a victim and / or aggressor. Several studies have shown that students are often not exclusively classifiable as aggressors or victims (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Veenstra et al., 2005) and that these roles often intertwine, alternate.

**Receiving silent phone calls** is found 2-3 *times a month* for 66 people, and much more often, respectively *once a week* for 21 people and *several times a week* for 8 people. Ignoring or being excluded from online groups *several times a week* happens to 10 people who participated in the research, while 9 people say that they receive several times a week, threats and insults by text message, on the Internet through websites, web pages, chat rooms, blogs, instant messaging (MSN, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace ...), by email, etc.

As aggressive online behaviors are concerned, far fewer participants state that they perform those actions repeatedly, 2-3 *times a month, once a week or several times a week*.

**Table 3. Results on the frequency of respondents’ confrontation with situations in the field of cyberbullying**

| Answer variants                                                                 | Never | Only once or twice | 2-3 times a month | Once a week | Several times a week |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| I received threats and insults via text message, via websites, chat rooms, blogs, instant messaging (MSN, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace ...) | 319   | 180                | 25                | 8           | 9                    |
| I received videos / photos / images with aggression or violence with me or other acquaintances | 438   | 80                 | 19                | 4           | 0                    |
| I received videos / photos / images of embarrassing or intimate situations with me or acquaintances | 410   | 100                | 25                | 6           | 0                    |
| I received silent phone calls (the caller does not speak)                        | 209   | 237                | 66                | 21          | 8                    |
I found out that someone stole personal information or material about me (e.g. pictures, audio-video recordings etc ...) and then used it to slander me

I found out that someone shared personal and private material about me in order to have fun at my expense

I was deliberately ignored in groups online (chats, forums, Whatsapp groups, Facebook ...)

I was excluded or left out of online groups (chats, forums, Whatsapp groups, Facebook ...)

I learned that someone had hacked and used my password and account under a false identity (e-mail, Facebook ...)

I found out that someone used my identification data (name, images, etc.) to create a false internet account

I sent threats and insults by SMS, on the Internet through websites, chat rooms, blogs, instant messaging (MSN, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace ...), by email etc

I shared videos / photos / images with aggression or violence via mobile phone, Internet (emails, websites, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp etc.)

I shared videos / photos / images with embarrassing or intimate situations of other people

I made hidden phone calls when I wanted to stress / insult / threaten someone

I manipulated personal information or materials about certain people (e.g.: pictures, audio-video recordings, etc ...) and I distributed them to laugh at or hurt those people

I have deliberately excluded or left out of online groups (chats, forums, WhatsApp groups, Facebook ...) certain people

I used fake Internet account (s) to harass others online

I contributed to the spread of gossip on the Internet

**SO4: highlighting respondents' perceptions of the main reasons for a person to engage in cyberbullying-specific actions**

For the item that regarded “the main reasons why someone commits cyberbullying” the following results were obtained in Graph 4: they want to have fun at the expense of others (378 people, respectively 69.9%), are not aware of the consequences of their actions (301 persons, respectively 55.6%); try to assert themselves in their group of friends (266 people, respectively 49.2%), are insecure, emotionally unstable (252 people, respectively 46.6%), education received in the family (237 people, respectively 43.8%), envy (235 people, respectively 43.4%).

Figure 4. Findings on the main reasons why someone commits cyberbullying
- **SO5: specification of possible action strategies in cyberbullying situations.**

The family has a particularly important role in preventing and combating the phenomenon of cyberbullying, a fact confirmed by the literature (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014, 2020, 2021, Cortés-Pascual et al., 2020, Bonil-Nissim & Sasson, 2018; Ibáñez-Cubillas, Díaz-Martín & Pérez-Torregrosa, 2017).

One of the most important roles of the school, of teachers, and the entire academic community in cyberbullying is to educate the community on the responsible use of digital communication devices, to convey that any form of cyberbullying is wrong and therefore unacceptable (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

According to the respondents, “a person who is a victim of cyberbullying” should: ask for help from the family (360 people, 66.5%) or go to the police / justice (299 people, 55.3%) to not respond to the challenges from the aggressors (260 people, 48.1%), to block the aggressor online (256 people, 47.3%), to use the services of a psychologist / psychotherapist (211 people, 39%), to ask help from their friends (193 people, 35.7%), to talk to a teacher (162 people, 29.9%) (see table 4).

### Table 4. Results on possible cyberbullying action strategies

| Answer variants                                      | Nr. of people | %   |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----|
| To ignore the situation                               | 115           | 21.3%|
| To ask for help from family                           | 360           | 66.5%|
| To ask for help from friends                          | 193           | 35.7%|
| To talk to a teacher                                  | 162           | 29.9%|
| To use the services of a psychologist / psychotherapist| 211           | 39%  |
| To inform the Police / Justice                        | 299           | 55.3%|
| To take revenge                                       | 15            | 2.8% |
| To respond with the same methods to the aggressor     | 12            | 2.2% |
| To do nothing                                         | 14            | 2.6% |
| To block the aggressor online                         | 256           | 47.3%|
| Not to answer challenges from aggressors              | 260           | 48.1%|
| To inform the Police                                  | 2             | 0.4% |

For the item “If you inadvertently witness a cyberbullying situation how do you think you would behave” participants provided the following answers presented in Table 5.

### Table 5. Results on how respondents would act if they witnessed cyberbullying

| Answer variants                                      | Nr. of people | %   |
|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----|
| I would ignore the situation; it has nothing to do with me | 71            | 13.1%|
| I would take an attitude in favor of the victim        | 325           | 60.1%|
| I would be happy if the victim is an unbearable person | 11            | 2%   |
| I would clearly delimit myself from that situation, incriminating the aggressor’s behavior | 50            | 9.2% |
| I would pass everything in silence for fear of becoming a target of cyberbullying | 23 23 | % |
| I would tell the family the situation, asking them for advice on how to proceed | 203 | 37.5%|
| I would tell other people in order to find a better solution with them | 224 | 41.4%|
| I would beat / immobilize the aggressor                 | 2             | 0.4% |
| I would talk to the victim and the aggressor            | 2             | 0.4% |
| I don’t know                                           | 2             | 0.4% |
| Other                                                  | 8             | 1.5% |

As can be seen in Table 5, a large number of respondents (325 and 60.1%, respectively) state that they would take an attitude in favor of the victim. Also, some of the respondents would tell the family (203 people, respectively 37.5%) or other people in order to find with them the best possible solution (224, respectively 41.4%).

**5. Discussions and conclusions**

The Covid 19 pandemic brought a series of changes in daily life. Unlimited internet access, coupled with the natural desire to overcome physical distances by connecting with others has provided an environment conducive to those with aggressive tendencies to engage in acts of cyberbullying. Studies are still insufficient on this topic and seem to highlight an expected increase in the rate of cybercrime (Jain et al., 2020). At the same time, there are studies based on the analysis of online search for data on cyberbullying which finds that during the period when schools physically closed their doors and transferred the educational act to the online environment, the incidence of cyberbullying data searches decreased by using search engines. Search, and the physical reopening of schools, indicates an increase in these searches. (Bacher-Hicks et al. 2021). Therefore, physical interactions seem to stimulate not only bullying behaviors, but also cyberbullying, and as people who use the Internet are better informed about this phenomenon, public authorities seek to develop
effective programs and tools to prevent and combat this phenomenon. Just as much, some aggressors refine their methods, choose their victims carefully and manage to carry out their plans.

The opinion of the participants who took part in this research, based on the information they each have, is that the phenomenon of cyberbullying is slightly increasing, that there are many intervention strategies through which the phenomenon of cyberbullying even if it cannot be stopped can be diminished by the contribution of each us who at some point may be involved in a cyberbullying situation. For most respondents, the family remains a relevant court in providing support and protection for cases of cyberbullying. In our opinion, there are still many steps to be taken to reduce the impact of this phenomenon, and this can only be achieved through adequate cooperation of public and private authorities to regulate as much as possible the phenomenon of cyberbullying, as well as to advance effective cyberbullying programs, preventing and combating this phenomenon.

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