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REVIEW

Victims, perpetrators, and bystanders: a meta-ethnography of roles in cyberbullying

De víctimas, perpetradores y espectadores: una meta-etnografía de los roles en el ciberbullying

Sobre vítimas, agressores e espectadores: uma meta-etnografia dos papéis no cyberbullying

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a form of online aggression between peers, the prevalence of which varies from 10% to 40% according to studies in different countries. A large share of the scientific literature on cyberbullying tends to individualize and medicalize the causes of the violence, without understanding the context in which it takes place or the meanings it acquires for those who practice it. The study aims to understand the beliefs, values, and practices that adolescents mobilize in performing the roles involved in cyberbullying. The study was conducted as a meta-ethnography, aimed at producing a synthesis of qualitative studies based on the theoretical interpretation of their basic findings. The study's corpus consisted of 33 articles selected from the BVS, PubMed, SciELO, and Scopus databases. The results include a description of expressions of cyberbullying, motivations, and adolescents' experiences as victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. With symbolic interactionism as the theoretical reference, we found that cyberbullying is a unique expression of online sociability. We contend that its practice is associated with identity-building processes, based on mechanisms of peer identification and opposition by which the participants also reproduce and compete for positions of recognition in their sociability. In this process, cyberbullying sanctions behaviors that transgress a dominant symbolic order for adolescence.

Cyberbullying; Interpersonal Relations; Violence; Adolescent; Review

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Introduction

Cyberbullying among adolescents is a practice that has been introduced as a novel problem in the fields of health and education. The literature defines it as an intentional aggression (verbal, emotional, or social) by a person or group using electronic devices, repeated over time, against another person who cannot easily defend himself or herself [1,2,3]. This definition is an adaptation to online spaces of the concept of school bullying, emerging in the early 21st century, when research began on cyberbullying in the United States and Europe. However, various researchers contend that this definition is incomplete and inconsistent with the characteristics of online space, and that it is necessary to focus on the way information and communication technologies (ICTs) modify the conceptualization of aggressions among adolescents. For example, the authors state that the online space builds new forms of unequal power, especially in time and space, thus allowing unhindered access to the victim and the possibility of acting from anonymity, which facilitates attacking without disclosing the aggressor's identity [1,2,3,4,5,5,6]. Another discussion addresses the issue of repetition, since cyberbullying does not involve only the number of attacks on the same person, given that unlimited reproduction of a single act amplifies the harm qualitatively [1,2,3,4,5]. These characteristics, plus the aggression's permanent recording in space and participation by an expanded audience, forge new dynamics in cyberbullying that require specific analysis and theorization. Studies in various countries report that the prevalence in adolescents ranges from 10% to 40%, and that victims can suffer psychosomatic problems, depression, stress, low school performance, difficulties in peer relations, and even self-mutilation and suicidal ideation [4,6,7].

According to the literature, cyberbullying involves three basic roles, namely perpetrators, victims, and bystanders, and individuals may alternate these roles according to the context [5,8,9]. Among these roles, bystanders tend to take a central position, since their actions and reactions can change the course of events. That is, they can reduce the incidents' effects by offering support to the victims, reinforce the aggression by joining the harassment, reproduce the online material, and/or act passively, thereby legitimizing the act [10].

Studies on cyberbullying mainly analyze the differences with offline bullying [1,2,3], identify prevalence [11,12], build epidemiological profiles [11,13,14,15], develop predictive behavioral models [16,17,18,19], validate measurement scales [20,21,22,23], establish consequences for health [6,7], and evaluate intervention programs in schools [24,25]. These studies tend to focus on the identification of personal attributes of adolescents acting as risk factors to explain cyberbullying, without including perspectives aimed at understanding the context in which cyberbullying takes place or its meanings for those practicing it. Meanwhile, qualitative studies describe beliefs, values, and practices of adolescents that have experienced cyberbullying in one of its roles or online sociability in general, but they fail to address the interactions between the roles or reconstruct the dynamics of the attacks [26,27,28,29]. In this sense, research is still needed on the relational and symbolic processes that trigger cyberbullying and the links to the context. Another challenge for this field is the development of a theoretical interpretation beyond the cases' unique characteristics.

Based on this reading, we focused on understanding the recurrent beliefs, values, and practices mobilized by adolescents in each of the roles they play in cyberbullying, the crosscutting contextual characteristics that impel them to act or refrain from acting, and how this process is inscribed in their daily sociability. Our objective was to conduct an interpretative synthesis of qualitative studies in different social contexts to identify crosscutting patterns in the dynamics of cyberbullying and online sociability. We conducted a meta-ethnography of scientific articles for this purpose. Meta-ethnography differs from other reviews because it summarizes findings through translations of core meanings between studies, with the aim of conducting a new theoretical interpretation, based on the persons' perspectives and experiences [30]. In this case, based on symbolic interactionism, we analyzed cyberbullying as a unique expression of online sociability [31,32,33]. We thus contend that it is a practice associated with identity-building processes, based on mechanisms of peer identification/opposition, by which positions of recognition are also reproduced and vie with each other in their sociability [34,35,36,37]. In this process, cyberbullying sanctions behaviors that transgress a dominant symbolic order of what an adolescent should be and is [38]. Finally, we analyze the results' implications for designing policies on cyberbullying in adolescents.

Methodology

Meta-ethnography consists of a type of meta-synthesis of studies conducted with a qualitative methodology, in which the process involves seven stages that occur simultaneously and interactively [30,39]. The first two stages consist of the identification of the research problem and selection of relevant studies for establishing a corpus for analysis. To identify the studies, we consulted the BVS, PubMed, SciELO, and Scopus databases due to their international recognition and thematic specialization in health and social sciences. To select the search terms, an exploratory stage was performed that identified and tested a set of words that could retrieve studies on cyberbullying. These words are the following: *online bullying*; *cyber victimization*, *online aggression*, *cyber harassment*, *cyber abuse*, *peer victimization* AND *Internet*, *stalking* AND *Internet*, *cyber space* AND *violence*, *social media* AND *violence*, *Internet* AND *violence*, *social networking* AND *violence*, *sexting* AND *violence*, *Facebook* AND *violence*, *Twitter Messaging* AND *violence*, *hate speech* AND *Internet*. The reading and analysis of the results and construction of a preliminary corpus showed that the broad terms retrieved mainly other phenomena of online space and that all the studies that address cyberbullying mention it specifically as such, although they discuss its conceptualization. Although the descriptor cyberbullying entered the MeSH thesaurus in 2019, researchers have used this term since the early 21st century [1]. Thus, for the final search, we decided to use only cyberbullying as a free term (Table 1).

Based on the references obtained from the searches, we selected the articles that met the following criteria: qualitative methodology that revealed the points of view of the persons interviewed, cyberbullying as the object of study, defined as such by the researchers, and study population of adolescents 11 to 18 years of age. We excluded studies that mentioned cyberbullying indirectly or that assessed intervention programs in schools. Figure 1 illustrates the process of building the corpus. The final corpus for analysis was 33 studies, shown in Box 1. The corpus was evaluated with the tool *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme* (CASP. https://casp-uk.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CASP-Qualitative-Checklist-2018_fillable_form.pdf), with the purpose of analyzing the quality of the qualitative studies. The evaluation and discussion concluded that the material displays quality in terms of the clarity of records and is sufficient for the proposed objective. Box 2 shows the details of the analysis.

Third, from the selected articles, we analyzed the findings, discussion, and conclusions sections to detect core themes in each, to understand how they relate to each other, in the fourth stage. In this reading, we found that in all the studies, the adolescents report experiences of their own or their peers on cyberbullying and sociability. The studies tend to focus on a single role and offer results that complement each other. Thus, according to the meta-ethnographic proposals, we performed a synthesis based on the composition of an "argumentative line", which consists of inferring structures of meaning from the parts (independent studies on roles) that allow understanding the whole (cyberbullying). We thus analyze the similarities and differences between cases and integrate them into a holistic interpretative framework.

The fifth stage involves the systematic translation of the previously defined core themes. The translation lies in establishing analogies between the studies based on the texts' meanings. It is not

Table 1

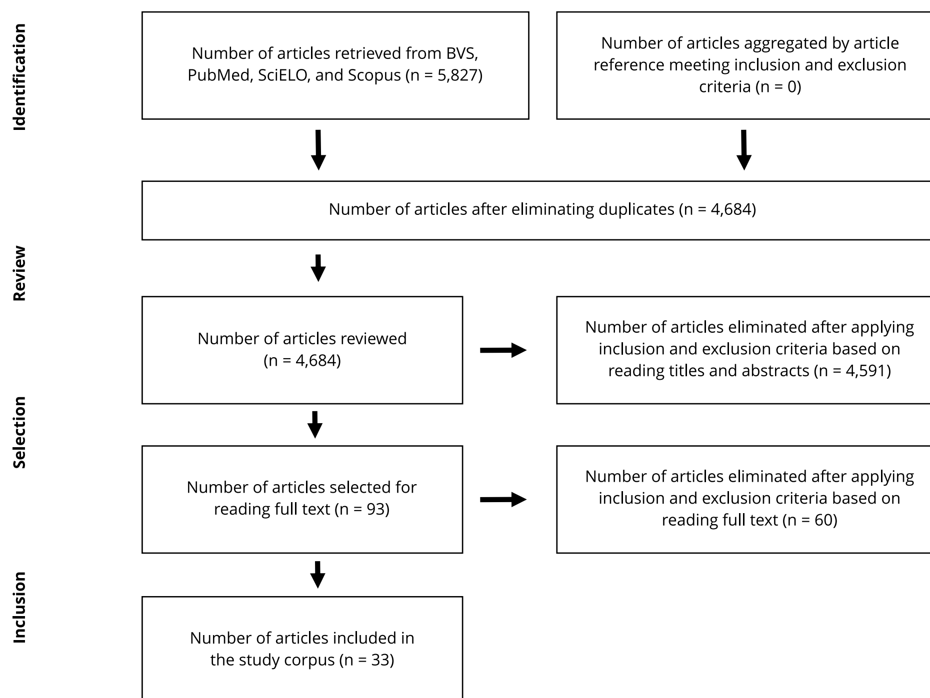
Number of citations retrieved from the selected databases. April, 2019.

Database	Search term	Search field	Filter	Number of citations
BVS	Cyberbullying	Title, abstract, subject	Article	3,808
PubMed	Cyberbullying	Title, abstract	Journal article	530
SciELO	Cyberbullying	Abstract	-	59
Scopus	Cyberbullying	Article title, abstract, keywords	Article	1,430
Total				5,827

Source: prepared by the authors based on data from BVS, PubMed, SciELO and Scopus.

Figure 1

Diagram of the selection process for the study's corpus.



Source: prepared by the authors based on France et al. [39].

only the data that are synthesized, but also what is implicit in them. The sixth stage consisted of a synthesis of the translations performed between the studies, aimed at building a coherent whole from the parts as a function of the theoretical framework. The description of the findings is thus presented, taking the corpus as a totality, without citing the articles individually. The seventh stage is the presentation of the synthesis, aimed at offering at new interpretation of the object of study traversing the entire set of studies.

Results

Adolescents report that regardless of gender, they can perform three roles in cyberbullying: victims, perpetrators, or bystanders [26,27,28,29,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68]. When speaking of their own personal experiences and/or of their peers, they do not speak of the roles as a "permanent state", but as a situational position they occupy [40,50,52]. Thus, the same persons may be attackers and victims in different scenarios [42,43,49,50,52,63,68]. Bystanders also play a varying role. They may reinforce the attack by backing the perpetrators, defend the victim, or simply watch [41,42,44,45,48,50,51,52,68]. While cyberbullying can display recurrent positions between those exercising the roles of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, for the adolescents, communication mediated by technologies makes it difficult to discern between roles when observing an attack. Adolescents are unaware of its contextualization, the event's trajectory, and whether it originates in the offline space or continues in parallel to it. In part, this ambivalence and alternance occur because the linkage between the online and offline spaces is constant, and persons occupy different positions in the two

Box 1

Characteristics of the study corpus.

Authors	Objective	Methodology	Country	Sample	
				Age (years)	Size
Baas et al. [54]	Explore impact of cyberbullying, aggressors' motivations, and struggle against cyberbullying	Group interviews	Netherlands	11-12	N = 28 (13 females, 15 males)
Berne et al. [27]	Identify characteristics of victims or aggressors in cyberbullying targeted to appearance	Group interviews	Sweden	15	N = 27 (13 females, 14 males)
Betts & Spenser [51]	Analyze uses of technologies and the concept of cyberbullying	Group interviews	United Kingdom	11-15	N = 29 (11 females, 18 males)
Bowler et al. [52]	Construct a user-generated conceptual framework for understanding cyberbullying	Group interviews	United States	14-20	N = 9 (6 females, 3 males)
Brandau & Evanson [26]	Explore social and psychological aspects of cyberbullying from the victims' perspective	Individual interviews	United States	14-21	N = 15 (12 females, 3 males)
Bryce & Fraser [40]	Analyze perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying	Group interviews	United Kingdom	9-19	N = 108
Bryce & Fraser [41]	Analyze the understanding of risks associated with exposure of personal information and contact with strangers	Group interviews	United Kingdom	9-19	N = 108
Connolly [43]	Analyze reasons for adolescents not to report cases of cyberbullying	Group interviews	Ireland	13-17	N = 59
DeSmet et al. [42]	Analyze bystanders' behaviors and their determinants for acting	Group interviews	Belgium	12-16	N = 61 (32 females, 29 males)
DeSmet et al. [68]	Analyze bystanders' determinants for defending victims	Group interviews	Belgium	12-15	N = 33 (11 females, 12 males)
Dredge et al. [48]	Identify factors that intervene in impact of cyberbullying on victims	Individual interviews	Australia	15-24	N = 25 (17 females, 8 males)

(continues)

Box 1 (continued)

Authors	Objective	Methodology	Country	Sample	
				Age (years)	Size
Ging & O'Higgins [56]	Analyze how adolescents understand and experience friendship, conflict, and cyberbullying in Facebook	Individual interviews	Ireland	14-17	N = 26 (females)
Keipi & Oksanen [53]	Analyze how adolescents understand and react to risks on internet	Written narratives	Finland	14-18	N = 258 (143 females, 115 males)
Law et al. [50]	Analyze motivations for online aggression, especially analyzing proactive and reactive aggressions	In-depth interviews	Canada	10-18	N = 15 (10 females, 5 males)
Maher [66]	Describe cyberbullying practices in schools	Ethnography	Australia	11-12	N = 22
Nilan et al. [49]	Identify sociological behavior patterns in cyberbullying	Individual interviews	Australia	15-18	N = 10 (5 females, 5 males)
O'Brien & Moules [63]	Describe victims' perceptions of cyberbullying's impact on their lives	Group interviews	United Kingdom	10-18	N = 17 (14 females, 3 males)
Pabian et al. [61]	Identify differences and similarities between offline and online negative interactions	Individual interviews	Belgium	13-14	N = 34
Parris et al. [59]	Describe how adolescents prevent cyberbullying	Individual interviews	United States	15-19	N = 40
Parris et al. [60]	Identify strategies to overcome cases of cyberbullying	Individual interviews	United States	15-19	N = 20 (7 females, 13 males)
Patterson et al. [44]	Understand bystanders' perceptions and responses	Individual interviews	Australia	13-16	N = 24 (13 females, 11 males)
Pelfrey & Weber [62]	Understand strategies for prevention and response to cases of cyberbullying	Group interviews	United States	11-14	N = 24 (16 females, 8 males)
Price et al. [28]	Analyze adolescents' perceptions of bystanders	Surveys with open questions	United States	M = 15	N = 961 (443 females, 481 males)
Radovic et al. [55]	Identify uses of social networks by adolescents with depression	Individual interviews	United States	13-20	N = 23 (18 females, 5 males)
Reason et al. [29]	Analyze victims' experiences and ways of coping with cyberbullying	Group and individual interviews	United States	18	N = 8 (4 females, 4 males)

(continues)

Box 1 (continued)

Authors	Objective	Methodology	Country	Sample	
				Age (years)	Size
Samoh et al. [58]	Analyze perceptions of definition, causes, consequences, and approaches to cyberbullying	Group and individual interviews	Thailand	15-24	N = 136
Ševčíková et al. [64]	Describe how victims of cyberbullying perceive the aggression and in which contexts it is considered more serious	Individual interviews	Czech Republic	15-17	N = 16 (7 females, 9 males)
Šléglová & Černá [57]	Describe how victims of cyberbullying perceive the aggression and strategies used to overcome it	Individual interviews	Czech Republic	14-18	N = 15 (13 females, 2 males)
Stacey [45]	Analyze uses of technologies by adolescents and their experiences with cyberbullying	Group interviews	Australia	10-17	N = 74
Vandebosch & van Cleemput [67]	Describe experiences and perspectives with cyberbullying	Group interviews	Belgium	10-19	N = 279 (137 females, 142 males)
Varjas et al. [46]	Describe experiences and perspectives of cyberbullying in adolescents from the LGBTQ community	Individual interviews	United States	15-18	N = 18 (5 females, 13 males)
Varjas et al. [47]	Describe perspectives of adolescents on motivations for cyberbullying	Individual interviews	United States	15-19	N = 20 (7 females, 13 males)
Wright [65]	Analyze characteristics of cyberbullying victims, their emotional responses, and coping strategies	Individual interviews	United States	12-14	N = 76 (39 females, 37 males)

Source: prepared by the authors.

Box 2

Analysis of study corpus based on *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme* (CASP).

Studies	CASP items *									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Baas et al. [54]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Berne et al. [27]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Betts & Spenser [51]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bowler et al. [52]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brandau & Evanson [26]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bryce & Fraser [40]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bryce & Fraser [41]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Connolly [43]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DeSmet et al. [42]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DeSmet et al. [68]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dredge et al. [48]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ging & O'Higgins [56]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Keipi & Oksanen [53]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Law et al. [50]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maher [66]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nilan et al. [49]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
O'Brien & Moules [63]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pabian et al. [61]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parris et al. [59]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parris et al. [60]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Patterson et al. [44]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pelfrey & Weber [62]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Price et al. [28]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Radovic et al. [55]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reason et al. [29]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Samoh et al. [58]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ševčíková et al. [64]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Šléglová & Černá [57]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Stacey [45]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vandebosch et al. [67]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Varjas et al. [46]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Varjas et al. [47]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wright [65]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: prepared by the authors with *Critical Appraisal Skills Programme* (CASP. https://casp-uk.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/CASP-Qualitative-Checklist-2018_fillable_form.pdf).

* 1 = Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?; 2 = Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?; 3 = Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?; 4 = Was the recruitment strategy adequate to the aims of the research?; 5 = Were the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?; 6 = Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?; 7 = Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?; 8 = Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?; 9 = Is there a clear statement of findings?; 10 = How valuable is the research?.

spaces [42,43,46,49,52,67,68]. The attacks take on a complex dynamic and generate the perception that they never end, due to the movements between spaces and participation by more actors [26,28,52,61].

Adolescents as aggressors: what they do and why

In all the expressions of cyberbullying, the adolescents are exposed to situations of humiliation, in which their image and social value are harmed [26,27,28,29,40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68]. The most frequent modalities are criticizing or insulting [27,29,42,43,44,45,46,49,50,51,52,53,54,56,57,61,64,65,67,68]; sharing/disclosing personal information, photos, and videos (whether or not manipulated with editing software) [27,29,40,43,44,45,46,48,50,51,52,57,58,64,67]; threatening [42,44,45,46,50,51,52,54,57,61,65,67,68]; hacking personal accounts to send humiliating photos or write comments that harm the account holder's social ties [28,45,49,51,53,54,58,61,65,67]; creating specific pages to post information, images, or criticisms of someone [45,46,50,57,58,64,67]; and excluding someone from online groups and activities [43,45,46,49,50,51,56,58,61,63,67].

We identified in these reports the principal motivations triggering cyberbullying. The first relates to "canceling" those who fail to meet the standards for behavior and appearance. Adolescents, through cyberbullying, highlight in their peers aspects that are sensitive for feeling recognized, especially attributes that fail to meet social standards for behavior [26,27,42,43,47,49,50,52,54,56,61,67,68], aesthetic production [26,27,43,47,49,50,52,53,54,56,58,62], and sexual orientation [26,27,29,46,49,54,56,64]. Victims are attacked because they are different, and because of what others think of them, as a function of socially established ways of being [26,27,29,42,43,49,54,56,65,67,68]. In the reports, the adolescents assign a certain degree of responsibility to the victims themselves for being attacked, claiming that they are the ones who decide to be different, or that they have done something that led to the attack [27,29,42,50,56,58,61,68].

Although cyberbullying takes place in the online space, the attacks tend to be targeted to persons the attackers know in person [26,47,49,64,65]. Adolescents' use these practices to seek to build social belonging [26,27,40,41,42,43,47,48,49,50,54,64,67,68]. That is, by making fun, they believe they can entertain their peers, build bonds, and obtain recognition that gives them social status [27,40,41,42,43,47,48,49,50,64,67,68]. The scorekeeping is done by the bystanders, who approve the act by the number of "likes" or other devices that indicate approval of their posts on the networks [27,41,47,49,53,56]. This strategy is easier to implement when the attacks are targeted to a person who already has a negative peer assessment, because bystanders are more likely to legitimize the aggression, and the victims lack strong interpersonal ties to defend them [26,49,54,56,65]. Attackers also attempt to include, as bystanders, members of their own social group that support the aggression [47,49,50,52,64,65].

The second reason for cyberbullying that we identified is revenge [26,43,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,54,58,61,65,67]. In this case, adolescents attack someone who has offended them in some way, especially in arguments [26,29,43,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,54,56,58,61,65,67]. Among the situations that give rise to revenge, they comment that it is common for adolescents who have suffered cyberbullying and/or school bullying to attack back at their aggressors [43,47,49,50,52,54,65,67]. They describe frequent victims of school bullying as odd, shy, and small [42,47,49,50,65,67]. In offline spaces, these physical characteristics express inequalities of power that are not present in the online space [42,47,49,50,67,68]. They thus understand that the ICTs empower these persons to respond to the perpetrators with attacks [47,49,50,67]. When this happens, they feel that their behavior is justified, that is, it is legitimate for victims to act in self-defense with counterattacks [43,50]. In this sense, the online space is seen as a tool that allows individuals that have been victims of attacks in the offline space to counterattack in the online space [47,49,50,67].

Adolescents as victims: experiences and reactions to attacks

For adolescents, cyberbullying is experienced as an attack that does not end with the act itself, because it persists in the online space and in the memory of the potential audience [29,40,442,43,44,48,51,52,54,58,63,65,68]. In a space where image represents a medium for experiencing one's identity and values, practices aimed at disseminating photos and videos are perceived as more harmful than written or physical attacks [42,43,44,54,55,58,68]. Thus, the mere presence of an audience aggravates the acts, because this kind of violence leaves a permanent stain on the individual's online identity [29,40,43,44,48,51,55,58,65]. These

conditions mean that the attack's possible repetition is secondary, and that the adolescents feel that a single act is sufficient to feel hurt and humiliated [49,54,58].

Victims feel powerless in the face of the aggression, because they cannot control the bystanders' participation, eliminate the audiovisual material to stop its spread [29,48,49,54,57,64], or escape the situation. That is, they cannot detain the posting of messages they receive [26,29,46,49,51,52,57,60,65]. The discomfort is worse if the aggressors act anonymously, since they do not understand who is attacking them or why [26,29,40,43,48,49,54,65,67].

They often express anger towards their attackers over the humiliation and powerlessness by insults, spreading of rumors, or setting up specific webpages to expose them [29,43,47,49,50,52,54,57,58,65,67]. Another way of reacting is to downplay the cyberbullying by depicting it as an ordinary practice or a joke that can happen to anyone that participates in this space [27,45,48,51,56,58,60,61]. They explain that acting as if it has not affected them prevents spreading rumors about it, and shows that it was not something to keep private, that is, it was not the object of shame or hiding [45,61].

Despite their vulnerability, in the face of an attack, adolescents emphasize their wish to autonomously control the situation they are going through [41,43,44,45,52,54,56,58,60]. This position is seen in their resistance to talk about their experiences with adults [26,29,43,44,45,52,54,56,57,58,60,61]. They generally feel that adults fail to understand the online space, its values and practices, and their reactions cause new problems for them to deal with [26,29,43,44,45,52,54,56,57,62]. On the one hand, they refer to the possibility of experiencing other processes of victimization, based on complaints by parents to the school officials. Adolescents view the school's conflict-resolution mechanisms as situations of exposure in which the victims feel they are on display [42,43,44,45,51,52,54,60,62,67]. Thus, the attackers realize they were denounced and may carry out new acts of aggression and social canceling [42,43,52,54,60,62,68]. The second scenario relates to adults' control of the adolescent's online sociability. When adults intervene, some of their decisions aim to limit access to the electronic devices and/or supervise social network behavior in order to avoid new attacks [29,43,44,45,52,54,58,59,60,62]. However, the possibility of being left out of their online sociability is something adolescents wish to avoid, because it means socially isolating themselves [29,43,54,57]. Therefore, they tend to only speak to adults if they feel they cannot handle the situation themselves and they fear for their safety [43,44,45,56,58,59,60,61,62]. Otherwise, they prefer to seek backing and ask for advice from their peers or older siblings who understand the experiences because they are also part of the online space [29,40,43,44,45,53,54,57,58,59,60,61,62]. Girls are more inclined than boys to request help. Boys are more reticent, including about talking with their peers, because it could be viewed as a sign of weakness. They feel they must appear strong, and one way of doing so is to manage the situation alone or to physically confront their attackers [26,27,43,49,52,54,65].

While adolescents that are attacked sustain their online sociability, they tend to modify the ways they use the technologies [27,41,43,49,51,52,55,56,57,60]. They mainly reduce the personal exposure of information and photos [27,41,43,49,51,52,55,56,60], learning security techniques with their accounts, and are more cautious in their interactions [55,57,59].

Adolescents as bystanders and their motivations for participating

Adolescents report that in the presence of an act of aggression, their intervention as bystanders depends on contextual aspects such as their ties with the victims and attackers, the type of aggression, and the gender of those involved [28,42,44,45,52,62,68]. One of the reasons for taking so many variables into account is that to defend the victim also means exposing themselves to reprisals by the initial perpetrator, or by others [26,28,42,43,44,52,56,62,68].

Before deciding to intervene, they mention the need to gather as much information as possible about the acts. The risk of accusing or defending based on a misinterpretation would be a justification for criticism from their peers [42,44,45,62,68]. This is because they access scenes that are part of a process they are unfamiliar with, so what appear to be attacks may actually be jokes between friends [40,42,43,44,45,49,54,67,68], or they may not know if the protagonists were perpetrators or victims [42,43,50,52,68]. When bystanders know the protagonists, it is simple for them to gather information, but when they do not, they prefer not to intervene [42,44,62,68].

They generally report acting in favor of the victims, when these are their friends [28,42,44,61,62,68]. Even if they would prefer not to get involved for fear of being attacked themselves, they feel they

have an obligation, since it affects them more to be socially castigated for not respecting the values of closeness than for being the target of attack [28,42,44,62,68]. Since the peer groups tend to be those acting in favor, adolescents that do not belong to any group do not have peers to intervene in their defense or to contain the conflict, and are thus in a position of greater vulnerability [42,44,49,50,65,68]. Nevertheless, some adolescents tend to act despite not having any ties. They do so motivated by a feeling of empathy, either because they have been victims themselves on previous occasions or because they see themselves with enough power to serve as references [28,42,44,52]. The bystanders' social value thus comes into play [44,44,52]. When they enjoy good social status, defined as "popular" or "strong", they are expected to act in favor of their friends and are criticized if they decide not to do so [28,42]. Meanwhile, bystanders that do not enjoy such status do not feel secure enough to intervene, for fear of also being attacked [28,42,43,44,52,54].

To avoid acts that would expose them to further processes of victimization, adolescents report that they would participate more in defense of the victims if they could do so anonymously [28,52,53]. One strategy they consider is to approach the attackers and victims independently and in private, to avoid shaming or provoking them in public [42,52]. They also consider the severity of the attack. They tend not to intervene when they interpret the event as a joke among friends [40,42,43,44,45,49,54,67]. On the other hand, intervention is legitimized as the frequency or type of attack increases [28,42,44,58,62,67]. Repetition of the act, physical threats, and the perception that the victims are unable to defend themselves motivates bystanders to intervene [42,44,62]. Finally, bystanders take gender into account to determine their action. Adolescent girls are more inclined to express the emotions triggered by cyberbullying, and the attempt to defend themselves results from long and complex struggles to include other persons in the discussion, while boys are more reserved and downplay the attack's effects on their lives [44,45,56,60]. Thus, female victims tend to try not to get involved or to do so through private messages [44].

Presentation of the synthesis: cyberbullying as an expression of online sociability

Goffman [32] states that persons in daily sociability behave like actors that play roles intended to meet certain expectations towards them. In their actions, they tend to appear as people expect them to, choosing certain personal attributes and hiding others that tend to discredit them. Thus, interaction always involves the representation of a façade of oneself adjusted to the social expectations related to each actor's position, identity, and intentions. We can say that social networks act as the façade where adolescents are constantly acting out themselves. The personal material posted on social networks is built for the audience comprising the online space and is made available for the audience to express what they think about it through clicks, sharing, and "likes". Competition for recognition thus rages in the social networks, translated as symbolic and social capital for those who obtain it [69]. For adolescents, the importance of gaining recognition is related to identity-building, whereby they can define who they are based on feedback from others on their posts, because "the self" is built as a product of this interaction [32].

According to their capital, adolescents occupy certain positions in their sociability and establish power relations permeated by expectations of mutual recognition. In this context, we view cyberbullying as one of the mechanisms by which adolescents organize, produce, and reproduce power positions attributed by recognition through acts of identification with and differentiation from their peers [34,35,37]. Focusing on the various practices with which cyberbullying is carried out, we find that the characteristic permeating them is that the aim is to damage the target's image and social status. The intention is not merely to "do harm"; it is to harm identity by assigning a negative and critical value to aspects of the person's body, aesthetic production, personality, and behavior. In Goffman's [32] terms, we can say that the attack aims to discredit the façade displayed by other adolescents.

We identified, in the corpus, the motivations that trigger cyberbullying. The first involves the ways peer recognition comes into play, based on the built-up façades. As highlighted by Goffman [32], the audience believe in the role they are playing, but they also evaluate and judge whether it is adequate, based on their behavioral expectations. According to Butler [38], the body's engenderment lies in conventions that sanction and proscribe how each person performs their own body. Following Butler, we can say that cyberbullying also reflects the surveillance and judgment of gender acts. Through it, adolescents sanction the attributes and behaviors that transgress the ideals comprising their valuative

repertoires [70]. In pursuit of their identity, the ideals operate as their referential margins, as the point they hope to reach. They thus criticize aspects whose values they reject, with which they do not identify. Thus, the findings show that adolescents rationalize attacks targeted to these persons. In some cases, they hold the victims accountable for not behaving as they should, and in other cases, while they do not agree with the attack (that is, they do not think it is right, nor would they do it themselves), they do understand why it is happening.

The second motivation is revenge. That is, the attacks are used to resolve a prior conflict to sanction persons that threatened their expectations of recognition [36]. When the adolescents' worth is placed in check, they seek to restore it via the aggression by discrediting another's image for an audience. According to Gimenez [34], individuals occupying dominated positions either accept the dominant definition of their identity or rebel to be able to challenge the value scale that puts them in a devalued position. In such cases, the online space offers them a medium to resist, because physical distance and anonymity protects them from continuing to be victimized and offers them the conditions to attempt to change positions in their recognition.

We observed that the motivations included the struggle for recognition, through a process of identification by opposition, by which I am what the other is not. As observed by Goffman [33], when a discrediting attribute is attached to a person – a stigma – the other's normality is also confirmed. Thus, in the act of aggression, adolescents establish an opposition and position themselves hierarchically vis-à-vis another person, invoking dominant discourses [34,37]. If the aggression is legitimized by their peers, aggressors recover for themselves the value of defending the dominant valuative repertoires and thereby obtain or sustain social and symbolic capital. Meanwhile, the attacked persons lose this capital and are left in a position of inferiority and/or exclusion from the view of others [34]. From this perspective, the aggression is not static, nor does it establish fixed positions. It should be viewed as a dynamic process with constant vying for peer recognition, affirmation of identity, and positions to occupy in sociability. Cyberbullying can thus feature alternating roles. Those in a position of inferiority in one scene may attempt to change their position in another [34].

Regarding bystanders, we found that when they support the attack, they assume that they are bearers of social standards that they defend and thus seek recognition for their position. However, when they do not support the attack, insofar as possible they prefer not to get involved, because it exposes them to attack as well. This happens when they confuse friendly kidding with an attack. If they intervene believing that it is an attack, the reaction by the attackers will not only be critical but will also highlight that they do not belong to the group that understands the meaning of the joke. That is, failure to understand is tantamount to not belonging, and for them this means disclosing their position in the configuration of relations. By intervening, they wage their social and symbolic capital, due both to reactions by the attackers and the attacked, and by the judgement of the audience, because their action is permanently recorded in online space. They thus report that they are more willing to participate privately, that is, making contact in person or via a private chat with the attackers and attacked. This allows them to intervene without compromising their capital in the eyes of their audience or their position in the framework of sociability.

Factors that call on them to intervene publicly are group belonging and the type of attack. Members of the attacked person's group are expected to come to their defense. If the help comes via private channels, the victims may feel supported by their close ties, although this does not eliminate the harm caused by the public exposure of material that attacks their identity. Thus, the attacked individuals wish their peers to intervene publicly to show the audience that they are backed by persons willing to defend them. If their peers fail to intervene, other bystanders may criticize them for failing to honor the duty required by the bond they have with the attacked person. Regarding the attack's severity, the adolescents' symbolic repertoires describe attacks with different degrees of tolerance. Some are taken for granted because of their frequency (usually insults) or are not considered sufficiently intolerable for them to wage their capital on some action. When they believe the attacks are intolerable according to their repertoires, they are more willing to intervene, even when the victim does not belong to their own group.

Victims of cyberbullying are exposed to situations of humiliation with an audience. If the audience legitimizes the aggression, the victim's self-image with which they expected to be valued is discredited and altered [32,33]. The adolescents feel shame, sadness, insecurity, depression, and social isolation due

to this victimization. Damage to the persons' value has implications for their ways of forging bonds, by altering their self-esteem and their perception of other people´s expectations towards them [32,33]. Thus, cyberbullying modifies their social position in the configuration of peer relations. Since the attack persists, recorded in the online space, they feel that the damage is permanent. The attack can be inscribed as a stigma, because when they meet new persons, the adolescents fear that they may have seen (or may see in the future) the material that tarnishes their image [33]. Goffman [32] emphasizes that individuals do not present themselves the same way in all social groups, because they have different expectations of behavior. The attack's persistence prevents individuals from making use of this segmentation and control of the impressions, so they lose autonomy and security in their social interaction. The attack becomes a stigma, forcing them to control the presentation of their personal attributes, on grounds that others may identify them as discreditable [33].

Once their social recognition is damaged, adolescents may seek to repair it using various alternatives (not necessarily mutually exclusive) [36]. They may seek support and backing (recognition) in their group of belonging, they may ignore the attack and pretend that their dignity was not harmed (for example, taking it as ordinary kidding), or they may respond to their attackers and seek recognition from their peers to sanction the aggressive behavior.

While victims may decrease their participation in social networks, they do not avoid them entirely. This suggests the importance of online space in their sociability. They may refrain from posting information to avoid exposing themselves to attacks, but they continue to watch what happens, while participating more cautiously. Their desire to stay online relates to the importance of feeling that they belong to groups. They thus prefer to seek backing from their peer groups. Adolescent girls are more inclined than their male counterparts to seek help. Boys tend more to withstand the aggression or respond with physical counterattacks. This attitude is related to stereotypical masculinity, which requires one to display strength and courage [35].

Conceiving cyberbullying as a unique expression of online sociability aims to acknowledge identity-building processes through the recognition provided by persons with whom one interacts and the competition for such recognition and configuration of power relations among adolescents.

Final remarks

A meta-ethnography is complete when it succeeds in identifying a synthesis in a set of texts, the meaning of which both contains and transcends them [30]. The current meta-ethnography allowed summarizing the findings from 33 studies that complement and reinforce each other, building a line of argument that provides a more complete view of cyberbullying through the three most common roles played by its protagonists. The results are significant for the field of collective health, providing theoretical elements for understanding this violence among adolescents, to discuss and design public policies to deal with it, and to generate new questions for more in-depth study of cyberbullying.

The results show that the common characteristic in the expressions of cyberbullying is the intent to attack the victims' social value. To analyze it, we addressed identity-building as a constant process stemming from the recognition awarded by others. In this framework, we contend that cyberbullying is exercised as an identity-building mechanism, based on processes of peer identification and opposition. That is, by discrediting a person due to an attribute of their personality, aesthetic production, behavior, and sexuality, the aggressor marks a difference and displays identification with the opposite attributes (in relation to the target). Second, we found that in this process, cyberbullying both reproduces and competes for positions of recognition; discrediting a person in the eyes of an audience and affecting the sources of social value that sustain this position. Third, cyberbullying is a punitive practice against transgressions of a dominant socio-symbolic order, because it sanctions and legitimizes specific forms of being and acting. Based on the above, we contend that cyberbullying is not a new violence, but a new expression of types of violence already rooted in processes of identification, power, and gender.

The proposal to analyze cyberbullying via symbolic interactionism and disputes for recognition is an innovative alternative in the field of study. Most of the studies provide explanations based on the construction of epidemiological profiles and predictive models of behavior, based on theories

such as general stress, moral disengagement, planned behavior, and bystander effect [5,14,16,18,19]. These perspectives tend to individualize and medicalize the causes of cyberbullying and assign a central role to the online space (especially anonymity) as a determinant factor, rather than identifying how adolescents make use of the online space and how cyberbullying intertwines in their sociability.

Consistent with these predominant explanations, current policies to prevent cyberbullying mostly involve lectures on the "risks" of internet exposure, recommendations for the protection of personal data, and strong encouragement for parental supervision of their children's online sociability [24,25,71,72]. However, these preventive measures appear insufficient or scarcely adequate. Partly, because we find that adolescents try to hide their experiences with cyberbullying to avoid being controlled or prevented from online sociability, so that adults' participation should be based on the understanding of the role of online space in their lives rather than based on sanctions or restrictions. Besides, adolescents are apparently not ignorant of the risks or the means to protect themselves; rather, the aggressions are learned and rooted in their sociability through the search for recognition and relations of peer identification and opposition. Therefore, to provide information on risks and consequences for health, to increase parental supervision, and to reduce adolescents´ participation are insufficient recommendations for addressing the core problem. Rather, we contend that public policies should focus on ways to produce recognition among adolescents other than via differences and competition with their peers by discrediting one another's identity. We thus highlight the need to design policies incorporating the perspective of the intended target population.

Finally, the meta-ethnography allowed identifying cross-sectional patterns in cyberbullying and pools of knowledge on this aggression. While we identified gender differences in the articles' findings on practices and discourses of boys and girls, none of the studies took the gender perspective as the methodological and analytical construction. Future research could focus on how cyberbullying is constructed and expressed in ways of producing gender identities, performing case studies with a view towards all the persons involved to reconstruct the process of aggression, and analyzing how the characteristics of online sociability enable and legitimize this violence.

Contributors

C. Moretti participated in the study conception and design, development of the corpus, data analysis and interpretation, and writing of the final version. D. Herkovits participated in the study conception and design, critical revision, and approval of the final version for publication.

Additional informations

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Resumen

El ciberbullying es una agresión virtual entre pares, cuya prevalencia varía entre el 10% y el 40%, según estudios realizados en diferentes países. Gran parte de la bibliografía académica sobre esta agresión tiende a individualizar y medicalizar las causas de la violencia, sin comprender el contexto en el que se desarrolla y los sentidos que adquieren para quienes la ejercen. El objetivo de este trabajo es conocer cuáles son las creencias, valores y prácticas que los adolescentes movilizan en el desempeño de los roles involucrados en las prácticas de ciberbullying. Para llevarlo a cabo se realizó una meta-etnografía, cuyo propósito es producir una síntesis de investigaciones cualitativas, a partir de la interpretación teórica de sus hallazgos fundamentales. El corpus analizado se conformó con 33 artículos seleccionados en las bases de bibliografía científica BVS, PubMed, SciELO y Scopus. En los resultados se describen las expresiones de ciberbullying, los motivos desencadenantes, y las experiencias de adolescentes como personas agresoras, agredidas y observadoras. Tomando como referencia teórica el interaccionismo simbólico, consideramos que el ciberbullying es una expresión singular de la sociabilidad virtual. Se sostiene que es una práctica vinculada con procesos de construcción de identidad, a partir de mecanismos de identificación y oposición con pares, por los cuales también se reproducen y disputan posiciones de reconocimiento en su sociabilidad. En ese proceso, a través del cyberbullying ise sancionan comportamientos que transgreden un orden simbólico dominante sobre el deber ser y estar adolescente.

Ciberacoso; Relaciones Interpersonales; Violencia; Adolescente; Revisión

Resumo

O cyberbullying é uma agressão virtual entre pares cuja prevalência varia entre 10% e 40%, segundo estudos desenvolvidos em diferentes países. Grande parte da bibliografia acadêmica sobre esta agressão tende a individualizar e a medicalizar as causas da violência, deixando de contemplar o contexto no qual se dá e os sentidos que adquire para quem a exerce. Este trabalho tem como objetivo conhecer as crenças, valores e práticas que os adolescentes mobilizam ao desempenhar os papéis envolvidos no cyberbullying. Foi realizada uma meta-etnografia cujo propósito era produzir uma síntese de pesquisas qualitativas a partir da interpretação teórica dos seus achados fundamentais. O corpus analisado era composto por 33 artigos selecionados nas bases de bibliografia científica BVS, PubMed, SciELO e Scopus. Os resultados descrevem as expressões do cyberbullying, os motivos que o desencadeiam e as vivências de adolescentes agressores, agredidos e observadores. Tomando como referência teórica o interacionismo simbólico, consideramos que o cyberbullying é uma expressão singular da sociabilidade virtual. Argumentamos que é uma prática relacionada com processos de construção da identidade a partir de mecanismos de identificação e oposição com pares, por meio dos quais também reproduzem e disputam posições de reconhecimento na sua sociabilidade. Neste processo, através do cyberbullying são sancionados comportamentos que infringem uma ordem simbólica dominante sobre o dever ser e estar adolescente.

Cyberbullying; Relações Interpessoais; Violência; Adolescente; Revisão

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