

Cyberbullying and mental health of adolescents

Faye Grech, Mary Anne Lauri

BACKGROUND

For most adolescents cyberbullying can be very devastating, resulting in both physical and psychological symptoms. Young people who are victims of cyberbullying experience mild to severe mental health issues.

METHODS

This study investigates the incidence and effects of cyberbullying among a sample of 367 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16. The data was collected through a questionnaire which was adapted from the EU Kids Online European study. Motivations for cyberbullying include revenge, jealousy, power and a minority do it for fun.

RESULTS

One-third of cyber victims experience anger, sadness, fear and humiliation. They also feel unsafe, helpless and excluded. Results also show that 18% of those who were cyberbullied resorted to self-harm while 30% experienced suicidal ideation.

CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying needs to be given more importance in the training of health professionals since it has a negative effect on wellbeing and mental health.

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INTRODUCTION

Technological advances have made informational access and exchange easier and more rapid.¹ Digital Media have changed the way we live and the way we communicate. As with most things, there is the negative side of using technology. Using social media to harass others can cause physical and psychological distress and affects wellbeing of cybervictims.

Cyberbullying, cyber harassment, electronic bullying and cyberaggression all refer to a phenomenon which has been receiving increasing attention in the press, in academia and in schools.² The emotional and psychological harm that can culminate from cyberbullying is significant, leaving adolescents scared and distressed.³⁻⁴ Cyberbullies and cyber victims often experience negative outcomes such as school avoidance and failure, depression, and low self-esteem.⁴⁻⁵ Research on the topic shows that even cyberstanders are negatively impacted.⁶

Online risks for adolescents can take the form of content risks (adolescent as recipient), contact risk (adolescent as participant) or conduct risk (adolescent as actor).⁷⁻⁸ This study focuses on conduct risk, particularly the risk of initiating the cyberbullying and contact risks particularly the risk of being cyberbullied.

ADOLESCENT AS ACTOR OR CYBERBULLY

Cyberbullying is defined as an intentional and repeated aggressive act in an electronic context (e.g., email, blogs, chatrooms, social media, text messages, instant messages, online games, or websites) against a person who cannot easily defend oneself.^{4-5,9} It is deliberate and repeated.⁹ Cyberbullying acts are done purposefully to hurt, in contrast to accidents or harmless teasing.¹⁰ It can take the form of sending offending text or images, mocking, spreading false rumours and being

excluded from a chat group. In the online context, bullying messages travel faster, and the audience is much larger.¹¹⁻¹²

Motivations for electronic aggression include revenge, jealousy, fun or entertainment.¹³ Low self-control or impulsivity is found to be a characteristic of cyberaggressors.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ A high score on impulsivity, or a low score on self-control, is associated with bullying others.¹⁶⁻¹⁷

The cyberbully's anonymity gives the bully a sense of power and control.³ Different to face-to-face bullying, the cyberbully does not have to witness the effects of the bullying on the victim, thus blurring the empathic interchange.¹¹ The online disinhibition effect makes bullies do and say hurtful things more than they would face-to-face.¹⁸

There is a link between being a cyberbully and a being a cybervictim. Some cyberbullies admit that they themselves were bullied at a particular time.¹⁴

CYBERVICTIMS

Targets of cyberbullying have several characteristics in common. They are more likely to be seeking acceptance and to be noticed online, they are often not savvy users and may not have been made aware of internet safety. Often, they did not get opportunities to develop resilience when dealing with adverse situations and have less access to caregiver support. Lastly they are less likely to report an unsafe cyber situation to an adult.¹⁹ Studies report that approximately half of adolescents experience cyberbullying while more than half report witnessing frequent online bullying with most students failing to report it.²⁰

Long-term consequences of cyberbullying include hyperactivity, conduct issues, low pro-social behaviours, smoking, intoxication, and psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches.²¹

Lodge, found that those who have experienced consistent cyberbullying are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour later on in life.²² Adolescents who are cyber victims are more likely to have suicidal thoughts.²³⁻²⁶

WHAT CAN VICTIMS DO?

Cyber victims and cyberstanders can take action against cyberbullying, including printing complete emails, taking screenshots and making a report. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)²⁷ suggests eight steps to be taken by victims and their parents. First, the cyberbully should be asked to stop the harassment and delete any belligerent messages. This step should be done carefully but firmly to ensure that it does not transpire into retaliation. This is a crucial step since it defuses the cycle of attack and retaliation. Following this the victim should be asked to ignore or block any communications, to ensure that the bullying is not continued or perpetrated. The third step should be of making a hard copy of the abusive material and showing it to the cyberbully's caregivers to gain their support in halting this behaviour. In this way, parents can become collaborators who work together to help adolescents to deal with this negative situation. Adolescents should then clean up contact lists and reduce other's access to the victim's accounts. Should the situation persist or escalate, the issue should be reported to the website, internet service provider or company. Parents and adolescents should also ask for support from the school psychologist, counsellor or administrative staff. Finally, if less radical steps are unsuccessful, one should report to the Cyber Crime Unit.

Programs such as Brave and BeSmartOnline! give children and adolescents information on how to deal with the cyberbullying. In Malta this

programme includes talks delivered to educators and students in schools. BeSmartOnline! is working to raise awareness, educate and empower students, parents, and educators on how to use the internet safely. They also strive to promote the website www.childwebalert.gov.mt, which provides a site for reporting illegal and abusive online content.

THE MALTESE CONTEXT

Cyberbullying is reported to be one of the most common issues faced by students who seek support from a Maltese online support service. The reports received by BeSmartOnline! Hotline and Helpline are on the increase as shown in Figure 1. In 2017, the national support line 179 operated by FSWS - Aġenzija Appoġġ received a total of 104 reports related to cyberbullying.²⁸

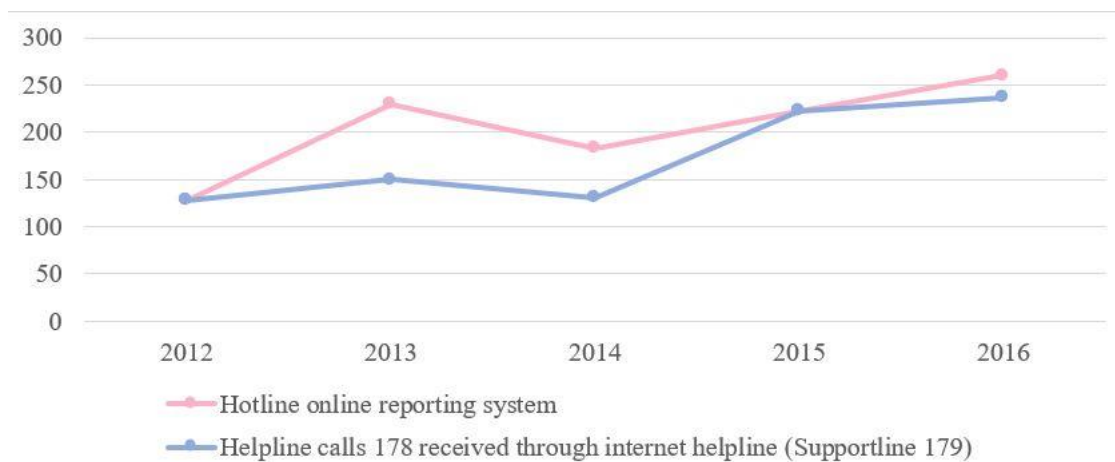
According to a Maltese study by the Lauri and Farrugia, among participants aged between 9 and 16 years, 36.6% of students have been bothered online and 12.7% have seen hateful messages being directed at others. One fourth of the participants in this study preferred not talk to anyone about it.²⁹ From those students who sought help about this problem, many (42%) refer to a parent for help. Talking to peers (39%) is the second most common way of seeking help. Only a few (9%) talk to a teacher or educator about it. Statistics gathered by the Cyber Crime Unit, a specialized section within the Malta Police Force, indicated a general increase in cases involving the Unit. Figure 1 shows the increase in the reports received by the cybercrime unit between 2012 and 2016.

According to the Cyber Crime unit consequences of cyberbullying primarily include fear, which stems from (i) the fact that the audience is unknown, and (ii) the internet's digital permanence which makes it possible for the victim to read and reread the content. The Cyber Crime Unit expressed the need

for more community outreach and awareness about cybercrime and especially cyberbullying. Many children and parents refer to schools for information about internet-related safety.²⁹ When bullying is affecting a young person's mental health

especially when the person suffers from additional health problems, doctors can work with school psychologists and educators to provide the necessary support.

Figure 1: Graph representing the number of reports received by BeSmartOnline Hotline and Helpline between 2012-2016



MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this study was to find out the incidence of cyberbullying as well as its effects. Based on the literature the following the research questions were formulated:

- What is the incidence of cyberbullying amongst Maltese adolescents aged between 13 and 16 who took part in this study?
- What possible effects does cyberbullying have on the victims?

PARTICIPANTS

For this study, classes of students aged between 13 and 16 from five schools were recruited. These were two State schools, two Church schools and one was an Independent school. Table 1 gives the population of students in State, Church and Independent schools and the corresponding sample numbers. Although the schools were not randomly chosen, they were selected to reflect different types of schools. Approval was obtained from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. School administrators acted as gatekeepers and made initial contacts. They were responsible for the management of parental consent forms to maintain anonymity.

Table 1 Student Population and student samples- state, church and independent schools

	Student Population between 14-16 (ISCED 3 Level)	Sample
State Schools	4,414	153
Church Schools	2,940	137
Independent schools	875	77
Total	8,229	367

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire used was based on a section of the EUKids Online questionnaire which was used in 27 countries in Europe in 2018. It was administered to a sample of 367 adolescents, during a Personal Social and Career Development lesson. The data collected was analysed quantitatively using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS

Out of the 367 participating students, 80% ($n=293$) of the participants identified as Maltese and 20% identified as 'other'. With regards to gender, 52% were female, 46% were male, and 2% indicated 'other' or did not answer.

One in four participating, 24.5% ($n=90$) reported having experienced cyberbullying. In this study, of the 90 participants who experienced cyberbullying, 67, that is 74.4% also experienced face-to-face bullying. The relationship between those experiencing cyberbullying and being hurt also face-to-face was significant ($\chi^2=3.869$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$).

Table 2 gives the forms of cyberbullying, the percentages of participants who were victims of cyberbullying and the percentages who carried out bullying online.

Respondents described how they felt when they experienced cyberbullying. Figure 2 shows that anger was the most common feeling. Anger may cloud one's vision and impulsive

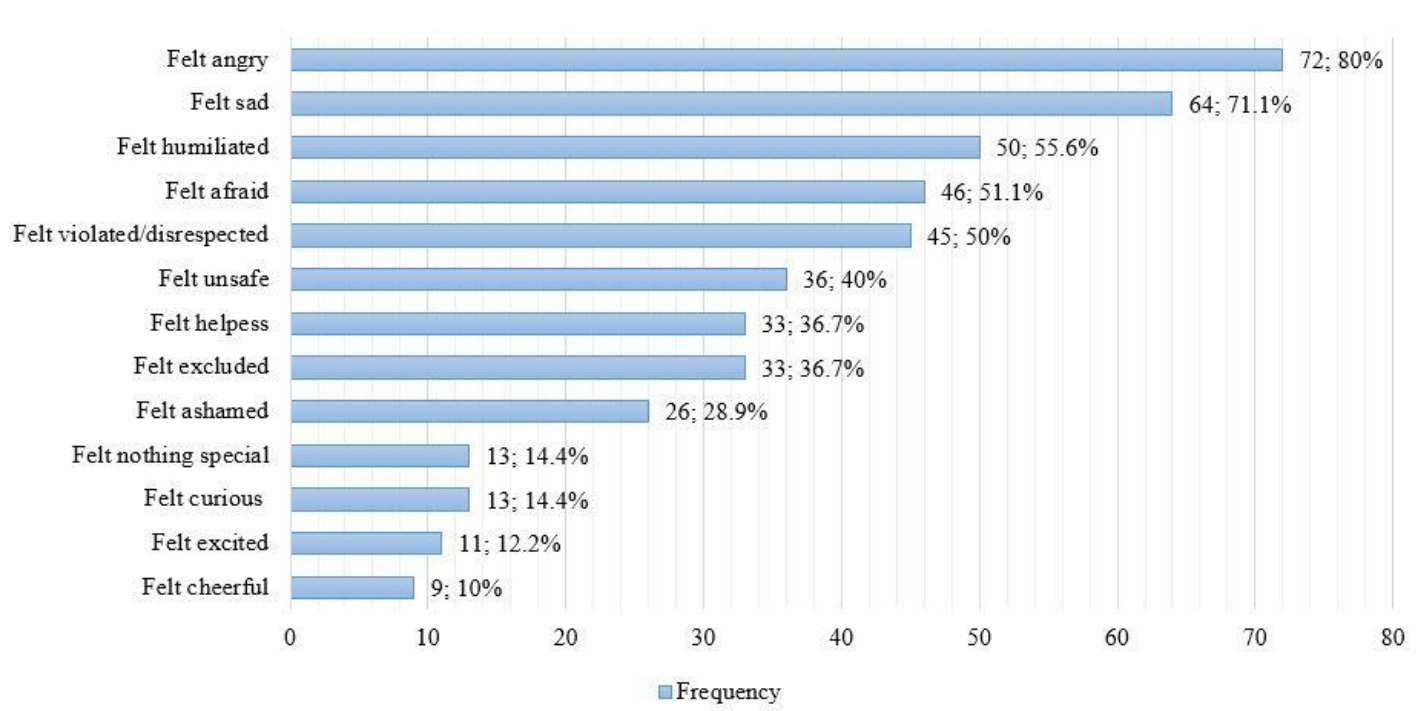
responses may ensue leading to retaliation. Retaliation would mean that the victim becomes the bully.

The adolescents may experience sadness and humiliation. They also feel humiliated because the bullying is being viewed by many other people especially when screenshots of chats are taken and forwarded to others. Victims also reported being afraid. Feeling unsafe has effects on wellbeing. The results show a significant difference in the mean life satisfaction score between those who were bullied and those who were not ($t=-2.366$, $df=353$, $p<0.02$), with those who experienced cyberbullying indicating a lower score for life satisfaction and wellbeing. Other studies also report this finding.³⁰⁻³¹

Table 2 Experiences of cyberbullying and cybervictimization

Experience	Valid percentage of participants who selected:			
	I did it	Done to me	Seen it happening	Never
Sending nasty/hurtful messages	23.2	28.3	40.3	27.7
Passing around/posting nasty/hurtful messages where everyone could see	7	10.9	37.4	49.2
Leaving out/excluding someone from a group/activity online	24.9	26.6	31.6	29.1
Rumouring online	9.8	11.2	42.6	37.8
Using nicknames on the internet in a disturbing way	14.9	10.1	35.5	46.5
Using offensive symbols online	24.1	10.2	39.7	36.5
Mocking on the internet	18.8	12.8	38.2	40.2
Making fun of shared information on the internet	28.5	8.2	37.9	32.8
Writing offensive comments on websites	8.1	3.7	34.8	54.5
Using humiliating expressions on the internet	10.2	6.8	32.7	52.8
Using someone's identity without their permission online	6.8	6.5	26.5	61.1
Hiding identity on the internet	19.5	4.2	22.9	56.7
Entering someone's private page without permission	9.8	7.0	18.2	67.5
Hacking someone's private page without permission	2.5	4.7	15.9	74.6
Sharing/threatening to share videos online without permission	5.9	7.3	29.9	58.0
Sharing photos online without permission	15.9	14.2	29.9	47.5
Using personal information in a way which the person does not like	7.1	11.3	30.0	54.4
Editing photos in an offensive manner on the internet	10.4	8.1	34.2	47.6
Using abusive/insulting language in e-mails	2.8	4.5	18.4	73.1
Using the internet as a slandering tool (making false and damaging statements)	1.7	6.5	28.1	62.2
Using passwords to access someone's information or pretend to be someone	7.6	5.9	22.4	63.6
Finding out where someone is by tracking their phone/device	13.4	3.7	16.0	66.9

Figure 2 Cybervictims' feelings in relation to cyberbullying experiences by frequency



EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING

Victims of cyberbullying reported feeling distressed, experienced suicidal thoughts, self harmed, and some said that they did not want to go to school (see Figures 3a-e). Some students reported that their academic performance suffered. These results are in line with other studies.³²

Approximately 1 in 3 participants ($n=131$) admitted to having instigated cyberbullying. Often, belligerent messages were sent via messaging, through for example, Facebook, Whatsapp and other social networking sites. Cyberbullies reported that the motivations for bullying include retaliation or revenge, jealousy and sometimes teasing. Figure 4 shows the motivations behind cyberbullying as described by the participants of this study.

In line with cyberbullying research with adolescents¹³ results of this study suggest a high correlation between victimization and perpetration. Those who instigated cyberbullying are more likely to have been victims (59% cyberbully-victims, 41% cyberbully only) ($\chi^2=4.350$, $df=1$, $p<0.05$). The fast-paced online world blurs the line between bully and victim in that it does not allow time for the victim to consider their response. Often the exchange of bully and victim roles occurs frequently and spontaneously. Figure 5 describes the dynamics between the instigator, the victim and the bystander. There are instances when the cyberbully and the cybervictim change roles rapidly. The cyberworld is carried in our pockets, with immediate and quick access, and posting without much consideration is an easy feat. Instigation and retaliation are easy behaviours in the online world.

Figure 3 Effects of cyberbullying

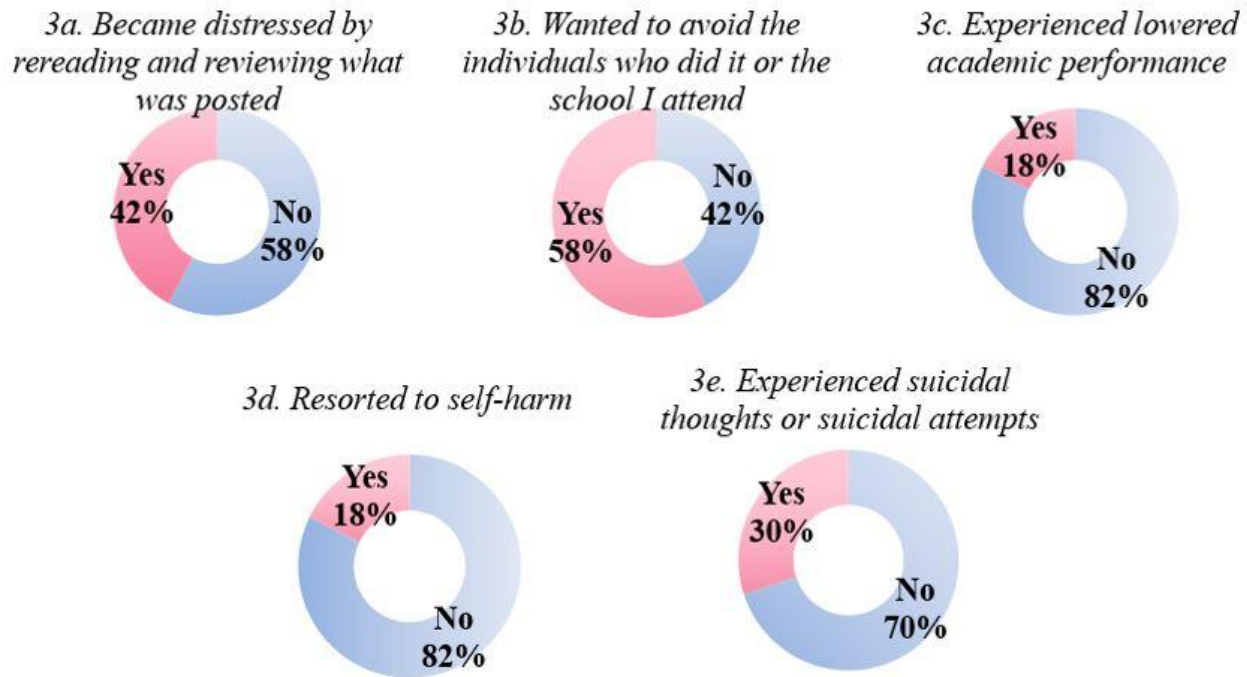


Figure 4 Motivations for cyberbullying

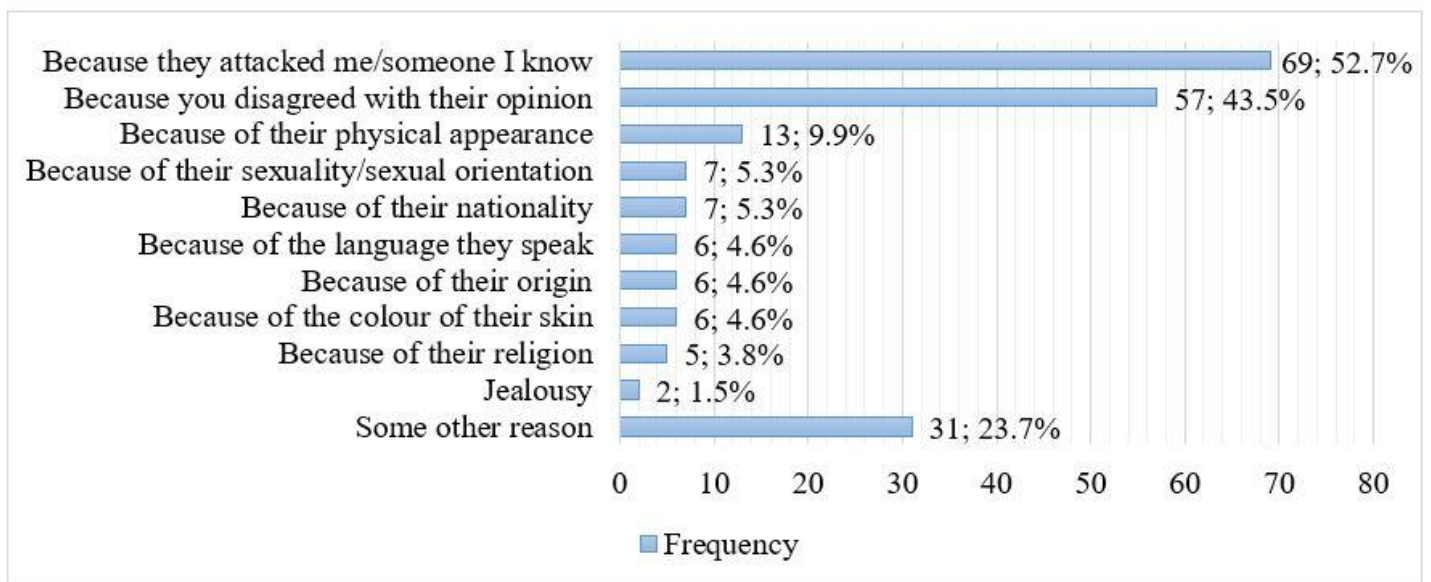
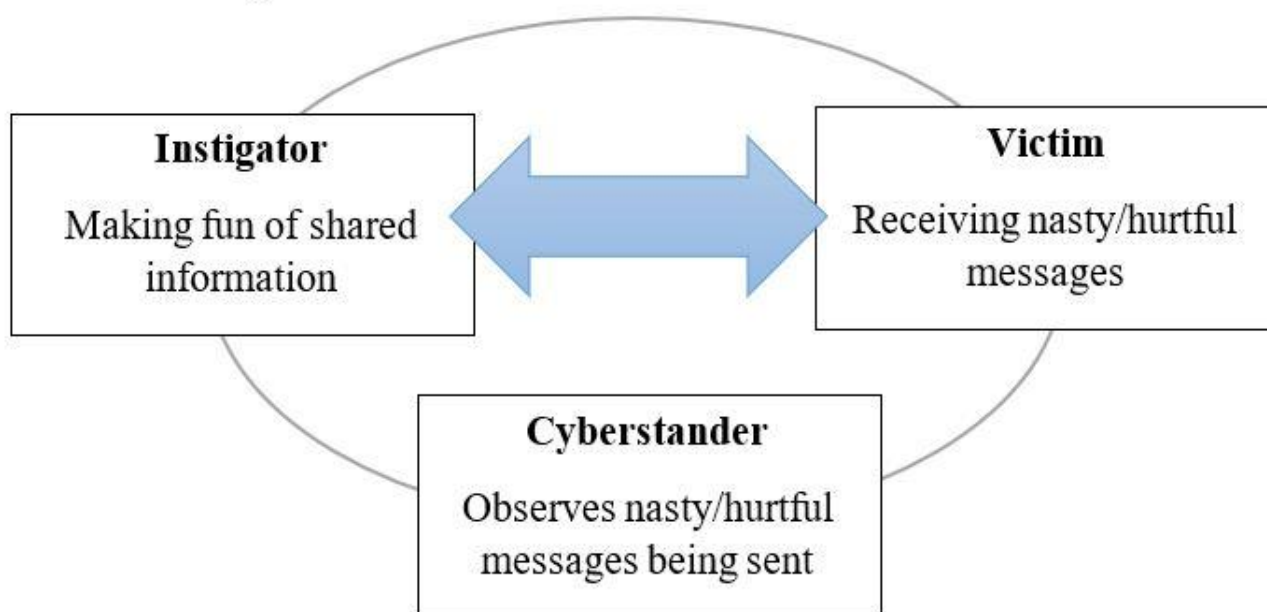


Figure 5 Dynamics between instigator, victim and cyberstander



DISCUSSION

Not all young people react the same when they receive hurtful messages. Some participants suffer in silence, others take it in their stride to do something about it while others still perceive it to be acceptable to retaliate. In this scenario the victim may become the bully and the bully becomes victim as explained in Figure 6.

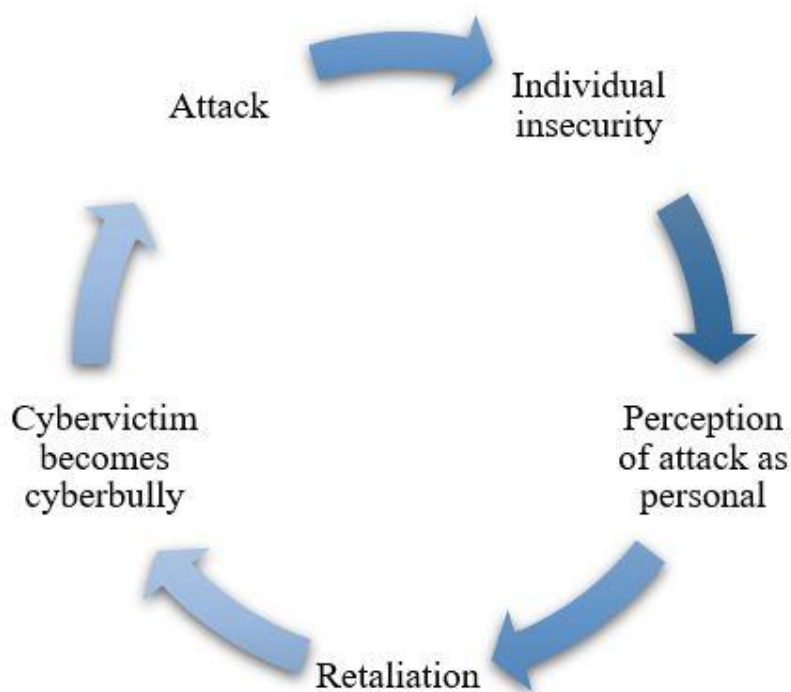
In the context of the fast-paced, rapid and ever-changing electronic environment, this change of roles occurs all too quickly. Impulsivity and lack of self-control are the cogwheels which power the cycle.

In light of the results in this study as well as others carried out on a larger sample,²⁹ Maltese

adolescents are experiencing, perpetrating or witnessing cyberbullying regularly. This is a significant problem which needs a holistic approach in order to be addressed adequately. A national policy targeting cyberbullying is needed since addressing traditional bullying differs from that of cyberbullying. This phenomenon needs to be given more importance through a transdisciplinary approach.

Research supports the 'Stop, Block and Tell' strategy, where children are urged to take four steps for managing the situation: (1) stop and calm down to avoid adverse reactions, (2) block the cyberbully, (3) limit communication to a friend list and (4) report to a trusted adult.³³

Figure 6 Cycle of cyberbullying: attack and retaliation



CONCLUSION

For professionals in training working with children and young people, awareness of incidences of cyberbullying and its consequences are important. Education about the cycle of attack and retaliation is essential to understand conflict as a maintaining factor of online cycles of cyberbullying. The feeling of disinhibition and invisibility in the online context should be targeted through teaching ‘cyberethics’, ‘cybercitizenship’ and ‘netiquette’. The ‘steeling effect’ suggested by Rutter is a result of teaching self-control, reflection, and self-regulation to overcome the effect of impulsivity on the continuation of the cycle. It is possible that adverse and challenging experiences are transformed into opportunities of learning and growth preparing them to become healthy and productive members of society.³⁴

SUMMARY BOX

Cyberbullying gives rise to symptoms such as hyperactivity, conduct issues, anger, sadness, fear and shame. European data shows that cyberbullying is on the increase.

* Maltese data shows that 1 in 4 of adolescents who are experiencing cyberbullying may self-harm and 1 in 3 may have suicidal ideation.

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