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Cyberbullying during the pandemic: an exploratory study about Romanian university students

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ABSTRACT: With the switch to online teaching starting March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, students have spent more time than ever online. The study (N=191) was conducted online and answered the following research questions: 1) Does the time spent online influence students experience with cyberbullying? 2) Are students from vulnerable groups more prone to cyberbullying? 3) What are the ways students believe cyberbullying should be addressed? 4) Are there gender differences in the way cyberbullying is perceived? Among others, the study revealed that women are more likely to acknowledge cyberbullying and that their professors are identified by a large part of the sample as perpetrators of cyberbullying.
KEYWORDS: higher education, vulnerable groups, Covid-19, cyberbullying, online education

1. INTRODUCTION

When we talk about bullying in general, school-age children first come to our minds. Of course, this *Lord of the Flies* view of bullying is far from reality, as we are aware that bullying does not stop when the children become adults. Workplace bullying is a reality (Ma, Wang, & Chien, 2017), and so is bullying among university students (Lund & Ross, 2016; Watts, 2017; Myers, 2019). The same applies to cyberbullying, a phenomenon widely covered in the last decade of literature, mostly on samples of primary or high school students (Smith, 2016).

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If cyberbullying is encountered among university students (Watts, 2017; Myers, 2019), appearing to increase over time (Cowie et al., 2013; Lund & Ross, 2016), it is not as visible as it would be at younger ages, due to the differences in student dynamics, as well as due to limited research on older subjects. The present study will explore the ways in which cyberbullying is perceived by university students and will investigate their personal experiences with cyberbullying.

In Romania, a large number of young people continue their studies through their 20s. More specifically, just before the pandemic started, according to data from the 46 public and 34 private universities in Romania (HG, 403/2021), and according to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (2021), over 400.000 people were enrolled in universities in the 2021-2022 university year. In March 2020, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown forced them all to switch from the traditional face-to-face learning to emergency remote learning. For two years, until the lifting of the restrictions in March 2022, with insignificant exemptions, the universities stayed online. Despite the challenges, the performance of the Romanian higher education system under these special circumstances was relatively successful (Deaconu & Olah, 2022): the transition to online teaching was fast and effective in most of the cases owing to the autonomy of the higher education institutions and benefiting from the widespread internet coverage of the country.

While the issues pertaining to the quality of teaching during the pandemic has gained the attention of researchers (Deaconu et. al., 2020), the research on the effects this shift to online learning had on the emotional well-being of students is limited, leaving decision makers in academia in need of information and tools to properly respond to a growing concern that online teaching might exacerbate some of the issues already present in higher education (Deng et al., 2021).

We propose an exploratory study in order to identify the impact of the online shift has had on university students, with a focus on cyberbullying. The aims of this study is confined to preliminary observations regarding cyberbullying among Romanian students within the context of remote learning imposed by the pandemic, observations that could serve as a ground for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first attempts to define and operationalize cyberbullying derive from the well-established research on bullying. Traditional, face-to-face bullying is defined as the "repeated and intentional aggressive behavior" of a person or a group towards another person or group of persons in a context of power imbalance (Olweus, 1994, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Corcoran, Guckin, & Prentice, 2015), that takes place in a static environment: a known or familiar space and time (e.g. school and schedule hours), and is visible to on-site witnesses. Similarly, as Pieschl et al. (2013) observes, cyberbullying maintains the elements of bullying: repetition, harm, power imbalance, changing only the means of communication – via electronic communication tools.

These definitions can also be found in the Romanian legislation, starting with 2019, when the "Anti-bullying Law" introduced legal definitions to a plethora of terms per-

taining to school violence and aggression (Legea, 221/2019 2019). This legal step led to the introduction by Executive order of the Ministry of Education and Research of a comprehensive intervention strategy throughout the Romanian primary and secondary education system (OM, 4343/2020 2020). In these legal documents "psychological violence" is explicitly equated to "bullying", with cyberbullying as a sub-category (Art. 1a, c, Annex to OM 4343/2020). Cyberbullying is defined as bullying through cybernetic means and its separate definition attempts to highlight the most common forms of it, from spreading rumors using the internet, to sharing ones pictures without approval or online harassment. The term bullying is explicitly reserved for harmful interactions between students (i.e. minors); any psychological aggression involving adults in the school environment pertains to the category of "emotional abuse", with the aggravated form of "psychological abuse".

This legislation was an important step forward for Romanian children's rights (Ghiman & Cîmpean, 2022), as the country has one of the highest percentage of reports of bulling at adolescents when compared to other European countries (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2017). On the one hand, these working definitions of bullying and cyberbullying are important, as they help recognize a phenomenon that is yet to be taken seriously within the wider culture. On the other hand, the fluidity of the phenomenon of cyberbullying makes it harder to recognize from the outside and even from within, thus raising doubts about the effectiveness of the old face-to-face bullying framework in defining and measuring these newer forms of bullying.

Langos (2012) suggests that, while the core features of traditional bullying are still essential to cyberbullying, a distinction needs to be made between direct and indirect forms of cyberbullying (e.g. the distinction between bullying through private messages and bullying through public communication on social networks). This distinction is useful in order to understand why certain instances of cyberbullying may be difficult to recognize as such, with different core elements of bullying being more or less prominent. For example, the repetition of aggressive behavior is most obvious in direct forms of communication, as is the case with intentionality, which is more difficult to point out in indirect forms of communication. Moreover, while face-to-face bullying often relies on a physical power imbalance, cyberbullying does not present a similar clearly observable imbalance in ability to use technology (Vandebosch & Cleemput, 2008), despite the fact that the social and psychological factors of aggressive behavior do cross over into the online environment. Also, cyberbullying seems to offer the victim less respite from being the target of attacks, as the online medium allows the aggressor constant access (Smith, 2016). In light of all these features, cyberbullying should be treated as a specific type of behavior for study, separate from face-to-face bullying, despite sharing some of the core criteria of traditional bullying (Smith et al., 2008).

In alignment with other studies (Myers & Cowie, 2017; Shariff & De Martini, 2016; Rivers, 2016), we start from the assumption that the main trait of cyberbullying is the power the perpetrator wants to exert over others, and thus is usually oriented towards victims that are construed as members of minorities or vulnerable social groups. Several studies (Myers & Cowie, 2017; Shariff & De Martini, 2016; Rivers, 2016; Whitney,

Smith, & Thompson, 1994) have argued that racism, homophobia, sexism, abelism and in general, the repugnance of someone different, act as catalysts for bullying and cyberbullying. This will also be explored in our study, along with the socio-economic status of the students.

As we have argued above, cyberbullying does not stop at a certain age; it continues to affect people throughout university and their adult life (Jenaro, Flores, & Frías, 2018). Despite this, the fact that the legal framework and institutional intervention strategies in Romania focus on primary and secondary school students, who are minors, adds another layer of ambiguity over what protection university students who have only just entered adulthood are afforded and what forms of aggression are considered serious enough to merit outside intervention.

3. METHODOLOGY

The sample is a convenience sample and (N=191) with the following respondents characteristics: 81,6% women and 18.4% men, and 30.9% 1st year students, 15.7% 2nd year students, 51.8% 3rd year students, and 1.6% students enrolled in a master program. The majority of the sample consists of ethnic Romanians, with only 5.7% respondents of other ethnicities.

A questionnaire, structured in three parts concerning internet use, cyberbullying and socio-demographic questions, was disseminated online among university students from Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, the Romanian cities with the highest number of students. The survey link was circulated on online students groups and sent to professors to disseminate among their students. In addition to the quantitative study, students were invited to share personal stories and discuss freely about their attitudes on cyberbullying. More than half agreed to answer.

The two studies are presented together.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts: internet use, cyberbullying and socio-demographic questions. We measured:

The ways the students use the internet: the frequency they use the internet and social media; what social media platform are they using and how frequent;

Their encounters with cyberbullying: the cyberbullying victimization scale (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006);

Their attitudes towards cyberbullying: Respondents viewpoints regarding cyberbullying (Abaido, 2019).

The study tackles the following research questions:

1) Does the time spent online influence students experience with cyberbullying?

2) Are students from vulnerable groups more prone to cyberbullying?

3) What are the ways students believe cyberbullying should be addressed?

4) Are there gender differences in the way cyberbullying is perceived?

The participation was anonymous and voluntary. Only respondents who gave their active consent by clicking "Yes, I would like to participate" continued on to the survey. Respondents did not receive any incentive, monetary or in the form of course credit.

The data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 23).

4. RESULTS

4.1. THE WAY STUDENTS USE THE INTERNET

The respondents spend a great deal of time online, with an average of 7.5 hours per day (SD = 3.5). As social media tends to have a negative effect on the users' self-esteem, an important part of the study was to control for the use of social media. As we can see, the students tend to log in daily on different platforms, most of them on Instagram, Youtube and Facebook. As previous studies have shown (Balaban, Constantinescu and Mustatea 2018), Romanian youth are not as present on Twitter or other platforms as they are on Instagram or Facebook, with Instagram growing popularity over Facebook over the years. This is important to our research, as previous studies showed that social media use and cyber engagement amplifies cyberbullying, cyber harassment and cyber stalking (Al-Rahmi et al., 2018).

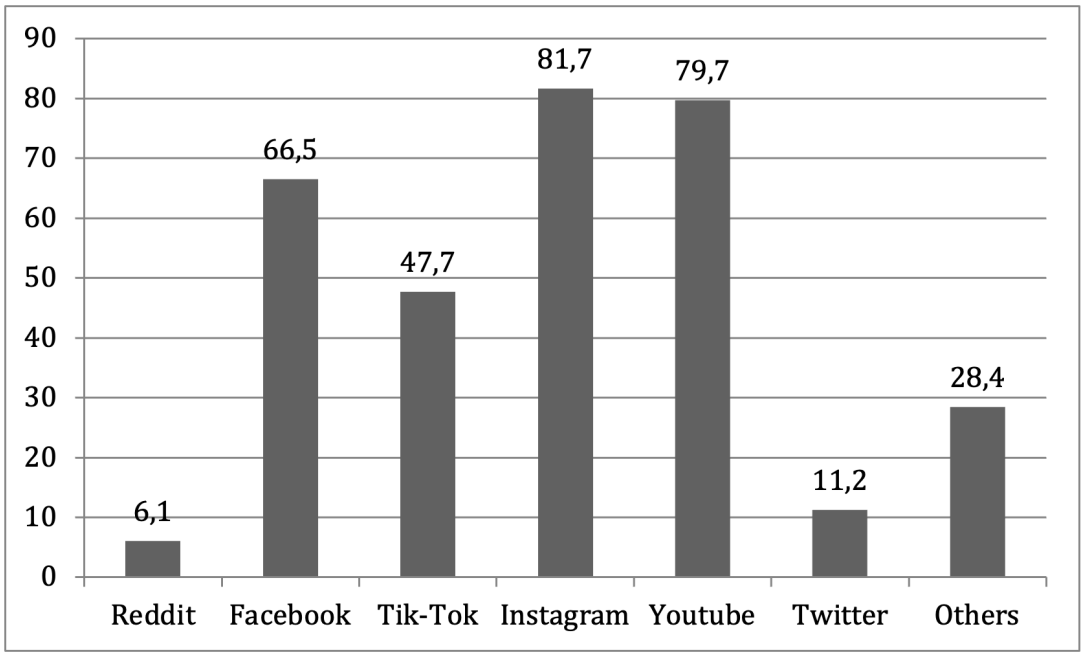

Figure 1. Frequency of media platform use (daily)
Source: own elaboration

The time spend online has increased following the 2020 lockdown (Dumitrache et al., 2021), and as the pandemic pushed classes online, as did the communication between the students and their professors and colleagues. This increase in online communication made students more vulnerable to cyberbullying. As we can see, the most

frequent means of communication with their professors was via e-mail, with a 86.8% positive response rate, followed by Teams Chat (44.2%), Facebook (41.6%) and Google Classroom (33.5%). If the communication between students and professors was kept mostly focused on official communication means, students chose to communicate between themselves on more informal platforms, the most frequently used being WhatsApp (75.1%) and Facebook (76.6%).

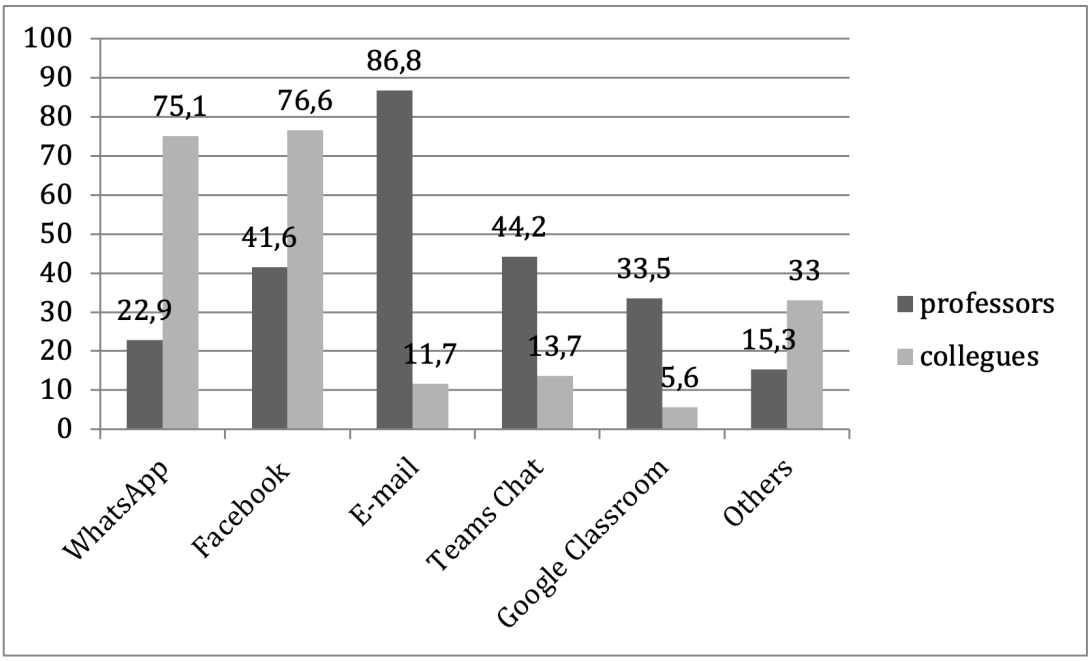

Figure 2. Internet use (usually + sometimes)
Source: own elaboration

4.2. STUDENTS' ENCOUNTERS WITH CYBERBULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING VICTIMIZATION

As society places a lot of responsibility and shame on the victims, respondents may be less willing to admit to being victims of cyberbullying themselves. We therefore tried to avoid this by also asking the students about instances of cyberbullying targeting people they personally know. The response rate is significantly higher across the board when the respondents are asked about others being victims of bullying, which seems to indicate that students were less willing to self-report instances of bullying than they were to report others being bullied. This can be found also in the literature, where it has been shown that frequently even in cases where young people admit that they have been abused repeatedly by their peers, physically or emotionally, they do not believe they had been bullied (Lay & Kao, 2018).

Most of the students have encountered at least one form of cyberbullying, making it clear that this is a real problem for them. More precisely, students have come across: offensive comments (65.5%), hate speech (46.2%), pictorial shaming (44.2%), posting or sharing embarrassing photos and /or videos (35%), spreading rumors (47.7%), stalking (26.9%).

Looking at the areas where students were more likely to identify themselves as targets of a particular type of behavior, we can see that 23.4% said that someone spread rumors about them online, through text messages, or emails, 19.8% have been cyberbullied. Interestingly enough, the percentage of people who declared that they were cyberbullied is lower than that of people who said others have spread rumors about them, meaning that students tend not to recognize this as bullying or that they do not want to identify themselves as a victim.

Item	**Me (%)**	**Someone I know (%)**
I have been cyberbullied.	19.8	42.1
Someone posted mean or hurtful comments about me online.	15.7	37.6
Someone spread rumors about me online, through text messages, or emails.	23.4	36.5
Someone posted mean names, comments, or gestures about me with a sexual meaning.	8.1	16.2
Someone threatened to hurt me.	11.7	16.8
Someone posted a mean or hurtful picture online of me.	7.1	16.8
Someone pretended to be me online and acted in a way that was mean or hurtful to me.	3.6	21.3
Someone posted mean names or comments online about my race or color.	1	12.2
Someone posted mean names or comments online about my place of origin.	4.6	12.2
Someone posted mean names or comments online about my financial situation.	4.6	12.2
Someone posted mean names or comments online about my sexual orientation.	3.6	18.8
Someone posted a mean or hurtful video online of me.	0.5	8.6
Someone created a mean or hurtful online account or profile about me.	2	14.2

Table 1. Percentage of students that answered *yes*
Source: own elaboration

The amount of time of spent online and the way they use that time explains the students' experiences with cyberbullying only in limited manner. The only correlations found are weak, but as the literature suggested, people who spend more time on Twitter are more likely to face cyberbullying then on other platforms (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015). One study (Karmakar & Das, 2021) even showed that during the Covid-19 pandemic cyberbullying intensified on Twitter.

		Correlations			
	Measure	1	2	3	4
1	How often do you use: Tik-Tok?	1	0.133	-0.031	.303*
2	How often do you use: Twitter?	0.133	1	.150*	0.198
3	I have been cyberbullied	-0.031	.150*	1	-0.057
4	Someone spread rumors about me online	.303*	0.198	-0.057	1

Notes: *p< 0.05 level

Tabel 2. Correlation between cyberbullying and use of internet
Source: own elaboration

4.3. STUDENTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

The respondents also had the chance to give personal examples of cyberbullying. They identified both colleagues and professors as bullies, leading us to understand that this problem must be addressed not only among students, but also among faculty. Humiliation perpetuated by the professors or the lack of respect and understanding for their religious practices was among the most frequent examples.

4.3.1. IF THE BULLY IS A PROFESSOR

If we look at the answers given by the students we can see that stories of being humiliated by teachers are not uncommon and that these memories linger with them long after the incident: "A senior teacher spread malicious rumors about me to other teachers and colleagues without my knowledge. Due to a misunderstanding about a paper that he didn't like and to which I had yet to receive feedback for." or "Over time, I heard some teachers saying, "You're good for nothing; Your opinion doesn't matter". They not only remember the harm done to them but also to their peers: "An ex-colleague was humiliated by a teacher in front of various student groups at a seminar, by saying that someone other than her wrote her exam papers". This type of experiences have been previously reported in Romanian studies that deal with teachers bullying their pupils through verbal and nonverbal aggression (Hojbotă et al., 2014), with some pointing out the prevalence of cases of reported teacher abuse where the law did not protected pupils (Telegdi-Csetri et al., 2021).

One student who refused to work on a Sunday for religious reasons wrote about her experience: "From the teacher' reply, sending the homework on Monday, not Sunday, seemed okay, but then, at the next course, she offended me about my faith without making direct reference to me. I later wrote her (the teacher) a private message and told her that the way she acted hurt me."

Interestingly enough, the students have different views on what should happen when the bully is none other than the professor. Most of them agreed that registering a complaint with the university is the preferred course of action.

On the other hand, a lot of students failed to identify bullying situations that happened to them or their peers, even though they answered positively to the previous closed-end questions that had the same topic. One respondent added "stop being such snowflakes", making a point about the importance of attitudes about cyberbullying. This is also aligned with the literature, as previous studies (Al-Rahmi et al., 2018) have shown that university students see cyberbullying as something closer to a prank than to a serious problem.

4.3.2. IF THE BULLY IS ANOTHER STUDENT

The impact cyberbullying has on students can be very harmful, affecting their well-being and their school life (Tezer, 2017; Bibi, Blackwell, & Jurgen, 2019). In the present study, one student explained the way this made them feel: "I received threatening messages from some of my colleagues; this made me consider dropping out of col-

lege."

We have explained in the literature review that being the victim of bullying is strongly associated with belonging to a vulnerable group. One respondent explained: "Colleagues from my group made mean jokes about my social status, saying that I'm very competitive because I need the scholarship."

Being a woman seems to bring about harassment by default, with several respondents explaining how misogyny is a frequent issue they face: "The only form of harassment that I have encountered was from some of my colleagues, it was misogynistic in nature. Meaning constant "attacks" regarding my subjects of interest, my answers during courses, (both through messages in the class group that contained some allusions, and vocally, physically during courses, with the same misogynistic remarks." Or "A colleague was harassed through online messages by another colleague, both through the platform used in the academic activity, and through other similar platforms. These messages often had a sexual and misogynistic character."

The students' age could also become a target for bullying activities. As one student remarked: "The colleague is older than us [...] she attracted several bad jokes, malicious and disrespectful responses (unrelated to the context of discussion) about her age and her withdrawn behavior, etc. I didn't think it was okay."

The particular rules of certain online platforms can also affect an individual's capacity to react to being targeted by hostile behavior. One student notes: "[...] I was part of a Facebook group in the first year of college - together with my 3 roommates. As the group was muted, I did not see the messages that were exchanged on a certain day. What I noticed was that I was kicked out of that group and that, before that; mean remarks were said about me (things that were not said face to face). Even if it's not about posts or comments on posts, nor about the distribution of these messages, the fact that I was confronted with these comments (and especially in my absence and without any right of reply) I've been very negatively affected for a long time. [..] I surprisingly still had nightmares about them". Again, we can see the lasting psychological damage, but also how shifts in behavior when interacting online can escalate interpersonal hostility. This, together with digital tools such as blocking, the persistence of attacks written online (in contrast with face-to-face confrontations that occur in real-time within a passing interaction), and the often more public nature of online remarks, expose the victim of bullying to a potentially wider audience and can restrict their capacity to retaliate (Smith 2016).

4.4. STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS CYBERBULLYING

The attitudes on bullying are straightforward, with the majority of the respondents agreeing that "If someone is being cyberbullied, it is important that they discuss about this with others." (93.9%), "Cyberbullies should be punished." (90.8%), "Cyberbullying is a crime like any other crime and should be punished by law" (85.3%) or "I would like to see stricter laws about cyberbullying." (88.3%).

Items	Women (%)	Men (%)	Total (%)
Cyberbullying is normal in the world of social media.	10.3	31.4	14.4
People who are bullied should respond instead of not doing anything.	36.9	46.5	44.7
If someone is being cyberbullied, it is important that they discuss about this with others.	94.9	91.4	93.9
I would like to witness more kindness and respect on social media.	98.1	82.8	94.9
I would report being cyberbullied.	81.9	57.1	75.7
There are effective ways to stop cyberbullying.	56.8	42.8	53.3
I would like to see stricter laws about cyberbullying.	92.2	74.3	88.3
Cyberbullying online is the same as offline (real world).	71.7	57.2	69
Cyberbullying is a crime like any other crime and should be punished by law.	88.4	71.4	85.3
Cyberbullies should be punished.	92.9	82.9	90.8

Table 3. Students' attitudes towards cyberbullying (totally agree + agree)
Source: own elaboration

From the total amount of respondents, 69% agreed that cyberbullying online is the same as offline, with a significant difference between women and men. If previous research (Francisco, Ferreira, & Martins, 2015; Hashemi & Chang, 2021) has shown that girls are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying, our study shows that this could be an issue of perception, where girls are more likely to recognize cyberbullying than boys. This would require a more in-depth discussion with additional research around students' awareness of cyberbullying situations, contrasted with the rate of their actual encounters with cyberbullying, in order to more clearly distinguish whether women encounter higher rates of cyberbullying than men (as predicted by gender power dynamics) or whether they are more likely to recognize cyberbullying. From our sample, 81.9% of the women said that they would report being bullied, with only 57.1% of men saying the same thing. Moreover, only 57.2% of men considered cyberbullying to be as severe as face-to-face bullying, compared to 71.7% of women. Similar findings were reported by Li (2006), on a sample of adolescents. Beyond the lack of awareness, the problem may also be male students' unwillingness to admit being victims of bullying so as not to appear weak (Lay & Kao, 2018).

When looking at gender differences in the students attitudes towards cyberbullying, we can see that women are more likely than men to respond positively to "I would report being cyberbullied" ($p<0.01$, beta = -0.203), "There are effective ways to stop cyberbullying" ($p<0.01$, beta = -0.187), "I would like to see more strict laws about cyberbullying" ($p<0.01$, beta = -0.216), "Cyberbullying online is the same as offline (real world)" ($p<0.05$, beta = -0.155), "Cyberbullying is a crime like any other crime and should be punished by law" ($p<0.01$, beta = -0.265), "Cyberbullies should be punished" ($p<0.01$, beta = -0.235). At the same time, men are more likely to agree that "Cyberbullying is normal in the world of social media" ($p<0.05$ beta = 0.177).

It would be interesting to note that previous research on students has shown that, with the shift to online classes along with the lock-down restriction, the stress level experienced by students was significantly higher on women than on men (Dumitrache

et al 2021). This increased sensitivity to the changes in communication and environment may also help explain why women were more aware of the issue of cyberbullying and its gravity.

Self-reported income, age, university year or being from a rural area did not influence the attitudes on bullying within our survey.

4.5. ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING

In addition to the students' encounters and attitudes toward bullying, we have asked students to express in a structured form their idea on what should happen to cyberbullies, peers or professors. Three directions of action were identified: (1) the students should file a complaint to the university, (2) the students should go to the police, and (3) they should not address the problem.

4.5.1. IF THE BULLY IS A PROFESSOR

File a complaint:

This section of our research is particularly of interest, as teachers rarely are held accountable for their behavior. For example, a study from 2018 with a national sample of Romanian teachers revealed that only 2.5% of them acknowledged "teachers' aggressive attitudes towards students" as a problem they dealt with (Bădescu et al., 2018).

A recurring theme of the answers that suggested filing complaints to the university is the students insisting on the institution's responsibility over the behavior of its staff. Moreover, we see from their responses that students are conscious of the power imbalance between themselves and their professors: "Because the teacher has a higher degree of authority over the students, it may already be difficult for the student to retaliate. Therefore, the best way to stop harassment is to bring these comments to the attention of the faculty.", or "The teacher is employed by the faculty, so this institution should take certain measures in case an employee of theirs is harassing a student." and "[...] I think it's a good idea for the faculty to be notified of such issues so that they can take the necessary precautions and prevent future repetitions of such situations.". Another respondent highlighted the importance of reporting this type of behaviors: "Harassment must be reported, and if this comes from the school / university, it is even more serious. [...] the teacher must be exposed for the damage done to the student, if not removed from the courses he taught to that group. Reunion with an aggressor is not easy or desirable. The faculty should be aware of such cases within it because it comes from people that students may consider role models."

The idea that complaints to the university are a tool to correct inappropriate behavior appears in other responses, with students noting that this will later protect others: "In addition, such a complaint would act as a tool against harassment for all students in the environment. That would have an indirect and sanctioning character once filed, because the teacher would be more thoroughly supervised and viewed with skepticism by his bosses, colleagues, and students."

Students preferring complaints to the institution also seem to perceive the uni-

versity as a better forum to solve their problems, compared to appealing legal action, which is more difficult to navigate and less oriented to resolving the problem at hand: "I believe that the student should file a complaint to the faculty in the event that he is harassed online by a teacher" or "A complaint at the level of the college would be more convenient than a judicial action. I believe that this would encourage victims to act and not abandon the fight for justice due to a complicated system."

According to their detailed responses, students who tended towards formal complaints to the university also made clear that they did not consider the distinct medium of cyberbullying or the status of the professors as relevant factors in responding to this type of behavior: "Online behavior should not be treated differently from offline behavior, so the teacher should be held accountable for their actions regardless of the environment in which they occurred."

Among the answers, one was particularly sensitive, with a student that told us that she was sexually harassed by a teacher. The story is one of cyberbullying, the student explaining that her personal data was exposed by the abuser. Again, the requirement is for stricter rules for interactions, and the need for protection: "I have been sexually harassed by a teacher and I believe that there should be clearer and stricter laws for such events, even if some previous actions had mutual consent. There is no excuse for blackmail, not even the argument that, at a sensitive point, the victim was intimately intimidated in some way, information that can later become a blackmail tool. I believe that personal information (including the visual archive) belongs strictly to the individual and no one else should have full rights to the disclosure of that information."

The students believe they should file a complaint, but at the same time they understand why some of their colleagues or even themselves would not do it: "I think it should be done because it can prevent the suffering of others in the future. [...] However, I understand the victims of harassment who choose not to talk about it due to fear of lack of support," or as another student responded: "I think that measures should be taken regarding teachers that harass students online, because there are many teachers who abuse their power, and many students prefer to mind their own business so as not to affect their college situation."

Involve the police:

In the questions addressed to the students in our sample, the word police, or higher authorities were not mentioned. Even so, one of the respondents identified the police as an actor that should be involved in the dispute. This is important, because even if the legislation exists, cyberbullying seems to be perceived more as a problem that cannot be fixed: "I don't know why an argument is needed, it's clear that a teacher harassing a student is abusing power, and the first method may be a complaint to the college followed by a complaint to the police." Even in this case, we can see that the same tendency of the students to first appeal to the university, before escalating the situation and involving outside authorities.

Do nothing:

From the people who answered our questions, several said they would not do anything if the bully were a professor, mostly out of fear of negative consequences. The power imbalance is something that the bully takes advantage of, and also something that the people who are being bullied are well aware of: "Personally I would start hating that teacher, but I wouldn't file any complaints, maybe out of fear or other reasons." Or "The professor was in a position of power, the student not being able to answer the teacher without risking his university career." We recognize the need of education not only on cyberbully awareness, but also on the legal and institutional help the students can rely on when they are in risky situations.

Overall, looking at the responses that students have with regards to what should be done when a professor bullies a student, we can see that they are very much aware of the elements of bullying that come into play here (power imbalance, targeted aggressive behavior etc.), however this awareness also leads them to be more reluctant to respond to their professors' actions for fear of further repercussions. Even when they do consider it appropriate to take action, they seem to strike a conciliatory tone, emphasizing "communication" and "finding solutions", and opting to exhaust their options before escalating the conflict (as was the case with the student suggesting involving the police).

4.5.2. IF THE BULLY IS ANOTHER STUDENT

File a complaint:

Overall, even when students suggest filing a complaint against a colleague who is bullying, they are unsure to what degree this falls under the university's purview and they lack information regarding what the institution can actually do about these kinds of behaviors: "I don't think the faculty would do anything concrete that would completely stop the harassment," as one student said. This is in contrast to their approach to bullying by professors, where the university's responsibility and capacity to solve the problem were unambiguous for the students.

The students' reluctance to report their peers seems to be in line with expected responses from authority figures. In one example of this kind of response, one respondent considered that a student victim of peer-bullying "could file a complaint, but I don't know to what extent the faculty could prove useful in this situation because the person can still harass his colleague online or even physically if he causes them problems."

Reluctance to file a complaint against a fellow student also seems to stem from uncertainty regarding where the university's oversight over student interactions ends. As one student put it: "Harassment is a negative act, unfair and has no excuse in any circumstance, whatever the positions of the aggressor or the victim. But I do not think that the faculty has the legal framework or specific measures for such behaviors, but it should still signal this behavior to the component institutions." Other responses focused on similar ambiguities over whether or not the bullying had occurred within

the context of university classes: "Although they might be a colleague from the faculty, the harassment also depends on whether it happens during classes or not. In any case, the student can turn to his close colleagues, friends or parents and possibly afterwards, to the faculty, if not, the situation could get in a worse place. This case is not necessarily the faculty's responsibility, not like it could do anything anyway."

In all these answers we can see again and again the tendency towards conflict aversion in the students' responses to bullying, with the university being involved only when other informal avenues fail or when the situation escalates out of hand. As one student put it: "if it is a colleague, then I think that the problem could be solved internally between students. If this cannot be resolved by communication, then I agree with the filing of a formal complaint." Another respondent weighed the need to involve the faculty against the gravity of the aggression: "Depending on the severity of the harassment in the online environment, I consider that some altercations may be too severe and would require the attention of the faculty management, because the mission of the faculty is to create an inclusive environment for everyone."

Interestingly, one of the few responses where a difference is made between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying regarding how to react to it, with the online environment seen as less: "Online harassment between colleagues from the same faculty is first an internal conflict, so the faculty should be the first institution to which a victim of online harassment should go. I don't think college is involved in things like this, even when it comes to offline. I don't know what measures could be taken in cases like this."

It should be noted that not all responses were ambivalent about whether or not the university had any responsibility to get involved, with at least one respondent identifying the university as the environment where the aggression takes place: "As in the case above, the faculty should be the first notified institution, as it has direct contact with the situation."

Also, in one case, the respondent suggested getting the university involved in order to notify the students' families to get them to intervene: "The situation should be resolved and reduced. This way, teachers can get involved and notify the parents of the students and put an end to that harassment." However this diverged from the rest of the answers to the open-ended questions, as the rest of the respondents did not take appealing to their parents as a viable strategy to deal with being bullied.

Do nothing:

If the students were more likely to recommend not pursuing any formal action, it was usually due to downplaying bullying as an interpersonal dispute, and placing the responsibility of solving this dispute on the target of the bullying. A selection of these answers is provided here: "No, because we are mature enough to discuss the issue individually and solve it as adults"; "No, they should solve their issues without involving the faculty"; "Harassment between colleagues can also be remedied in private"; "I think that these situations can be solved without involving the faculty"; "Conflicts between students shouldn't be solved by the faculty."

Some of the respondents not only do not think the involvement of a third party is desirable, but treat bullying as rudeness, and believe that the solution is among the persons involved: "I don't think a complaint should be filed to the college because this could worsen the conflict between them. I think that these kinds of conflicts should be solved in a friendly way"; "Quarrels between students should remain between them, as they can resolve disputes on their own. It's not the end of the world if a colleague says something mean."

The belief that the university lacks any capacity to intervene was also a factor in respondents refusing to pursue any formal action against their bullies: "I do not think that the faculty could do anything against online harassment of a student, so I chose the answer *no*." Or "The faculty would not get involved in a conflict involving only students".

One respondent who tended towards taking no formal action did hesitate however when the instance of aggression clearly occurred within the university's boundaries and supervision: "The faculty has nothing to do with everyone's personal life, only if it happens during class hours or activities."

Involve the police:

Again, when we look at the answers that suggested involving the police, the same pattern of avoiding escalating the conflict to the point where authorities are involved. As respondents see bullying from their colleagues as having less to do with the university than bullying from teachers (or because they feel the university does not have the means to help them), a higher number of them considered filing a complaint with the police as an appropriate response if the bullying behavior reaches a certain degree of severity: "I would like to say yes [to filing a complaint], but this is no longer the case of abuse of power, but more about immaturity. I don't see what the faculty could do about it. Decrease his conduct grade? Instead, if the situation is serious, they should file a complaint with the police." Other students think of filing a complaint as a last resort: "If things are not resolved between the two people, I believe that things should be taken to an authority, be it a complaint to the faculty or even the police."

Appealing to law enforcement is also seen as the valid option when the bullying does not take place strictly in the confines of the university: "My answer to this question would range from Yes to No, and I will explain why. If harassment takes place in the academic environment, then yes, I think that the victim should file a complaint. If it did not take place in the academic environment, I do not think that the problem can be solved with the faculty, but rather by other methods (harassment being a crime, the student can address, for example, the police)." Or, as another student put it, filing complaints with the university should be done "only if it is related to the faculty's environment, if it is not strictly related to the activity of the university then the complaint should be redirected to the police."

As in the case of bullying by professors, the respondents here were also pessimistic regarding formal complaints, fearing further aggression if they would report bullying behavior: "They would most likely still be harassed, maybe even more so than before,

because they "snitched." "I don't think the college would solve anything. Police should handle these aspects."

5. CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Overall, the results of our study indicate that cyberbullying is a serious issue among students, which is yet to be properly addressed. Nearly half of the students responding (42.1%) reported that they knew someone who had been the target of cyberbullying, with around a fifth admitting to being victims of bullying themselves, the aggressors being both their colleagues and, in some cases, their professors. One consistent feature we were faced with was the students' willingness to downplay these incidents, their reluctance to pursue formal complaints (either with the university or the legal system) and to retaliate, as well as their fear that speaking out would only lead to further aggression, as they did not trust the institutions around them would do anything to stop bullying or punish the aggressor. This can be seen both in the students' responses to the open-ended questions, as well as in the questions measuring attitudes, with less than half of the respondents believing they should respond to instances of bullying (44.7%). Taken together with response patterns which seem to suggest that respondents are somewhat unwilling to admit they are targets of bullying (respondents admitting that their colleagues were victims of cyberbullying at significantly higher rates than they admitted for themselves), our research seems to indicate that both bullying and cyberbullying have an alarming degree of acceptance among students as inevitable features of student life and of spending time online. Similar attitudes on cyberbullying were found by Blaya (in Cassidy et al., 2018), where only 2% of the sample agreed that the universities should punish cyberbullying behavior or impose sanctions.

The shift to online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic, perhaps predictably, shifted bullying behavior into the online sphere. As we have seen from the students' responses, rumor spreading, threats, aggressive comments, targeted attacks based on the students belonging to certain groups, have all thrived online, in addition to certain behaviors exclusive to cyberbullying (such as being impersonated in order to damage their reputation). Moreover, as we have seen in the responses to the open-ended questions, because students tended to be unsure whether or not this kind of behavior fell under the purview of the university, they were less inclined to report it to the university. One interesting thing to observe is that none of the students considered the existence of clearer material proof of the instances of cyberbullying (text messages, recordings, etc.) as a factor that would help them when appealing to the institution. Overall, the online shift does not seem to have hindered bullying behaviors, and the ambiguity regarding whether or not they are in an academic space when in online study groups, chats and virtual classrooms, seems to have further discouraged victims of bullying from responding to bullying.

An interesting feature to emerge from our study is that while there are some rules and norms in place against cyberbullying, both at the legal level, as well as on the level of universities' internal rules of conduct, even with their limitations, their actual efficiency is severely limited by the fact that students either aren't aware of these

formal protections against cyberbullying, or do not trust they would be implemented. If previous studies have shown that bulling does indeed decrease in schools where anti-bullying programs are active (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009; Gaffney, Ttofi, & Farrington, 2021) we suggests that any future expansion of either laws or the procedures of academic institutions against cyberbullying should be accompanied by better efforts to spread awareness of their existence and to encourage students to appeal to them for resolving situations of cyberbullying.

One positive feature to emerge from the study is that students do not make a distinction between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying when it comes to addressing them, as the respondents treated both as equally serious. They also tended not to downplay cyberbullying relative to face-to-face bullying, despite its widespread presence on social media networks, and considered it just as bad as face-to-face bullying, even if there is a significant difference between male and female respondents in this regard, 31.4% of men agreeing that it is normal compared to 10.3% of women, and 57.2% of men seeing cyberbullying as bad as face-to-face bullying, compared to 71.7% of women. Therefore, while it is promising that students seem to have some awareness of cyberbullying and negative attitudes towards it, they lack information about the legal framework and institutional procedures in place to aid and protect them, or simply do not trust that they would be enforced properly.

While 90.8% of students believe that cyberbullies should be punished, only 75.7% answered that they would report being the victims of cyberbullying, and even fewer (53.3%) believed that there are effective means to stop it. One explanation the literature provides for the unwillingness to report cyberbullying is the fear of retaliation (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2018), with men being more likely than women to keep quiet about cyberbullying. But is not only the fear of retaliation and the fear of losing one's reputation, there is also the sentiment that reporting on cyberbullying will not resolve the issue, an explanation that was also found in previous research. Cohn and Canter (2003) have shown that 25% of teachers do not see anything wrong with harassment, bullying or humiliation going on between students, and consequently the teachers only intervene in 4% of the cases of aggression). Moreover, 60% of students report that adults rarely intervene and that these interventions do not accomplish anything, the students consequently fearing that telling adults will lead to more harassment in the future (Cohn & Canter, 2003).

In line with previous findings in research on pupils, university students also identify professors as bullies. This is not specific for Romania (Pörhölä et al., 2020), but we empathize the need of interventions in universities that target not only students, but also professors.

Our research is limited by the absence of a baseline study that would have enabled us to properly discuss the situation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Romanian context. It is hindered further by the issues with the reliability of reports from the interviewed students: bullying might not be a term they are familiar with, and there might be different perceptions at play in recognizing it as a specific behavior. This matter should be a focus point in the future, as the results of any study on this phenomenon need to be confronted against the definition of bullying in the Romani-

an legal framework and in university guidelines, which are perhaps not as clear as they need to be regarding defining and identifying bullying and especially cyberbullying, as well as regarding how to determine the best response to these forms of aggression.

Regarding sampling limitations, while the sampling is not representative for the entire country, we nevertheless hold that the two cities that were taken into account share multiple similarities with the rest of the country. Moreover, the various universities' responses to the lockdown were the same, and the residential areas the students came from cover the entire country.

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