Cyberbullying Among Italian Students

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Abstract

Purpose: Cyberbullying is a new phenomenon, rapidly spreading among the youth of the Information Society. The diffusion of information technology in Italy is predominant among the younger generations; along with the obvious benefits, it is important to evaluate the possible connected risks. This research aims to investigate the uses and misuses of ICT among a sample of Italian students.

Methods: A total of 475 students of middle school and high school completed a questionnaire investigating the diffusion and representations of conflicts in the schools of Milan. One section of the questionnaire more specifically analyzed the use of ICT among the students, and the spread of cyberbullying.

Results: Cyberbullying appears to be a relevant phenomenon among students. In line with the European figures, at least 10% of the students declare to have been victim of cyberbullying. The numbers increase when considering telephone harassment. Students who have been victims of cyberbullying differ significantly from those who have never had such an experience in online behaviour and in the representation of new technology. Victims of cyberbullying also report a worse image of their school context and schoolmates, seen as more hostile and less supportive.

Conclusions: In Italy the study of the diffusion of cyberbullying among young people is still in an early stage, but newspapers are increasingly drawing attention to this problem. In addition, the first surveys, done locally, seem to support the hypothesis of its growth in our country. A in dept investigation of the phenomenon seems to be the first necessary step that could lead to effective preventive and counter actions.

Key Words: Cyberbullying, ICT perception, peer support, adult support.

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1.   Why are we talking about cyberbullying?

According to the data of the last Italian general survey on ITC diffusion of Istat (ISTAT 2009) the trend of growth in PC and Internet diffusion in Italy is strongly connected with the presence of an under-age member in the family group. The Italian media of families with Internet access is 47,3% (a + 5% compared to 42% in 2008), but this number increase

to 68% if a minor is present in the family, while it drastically drops to 5,9% for those families whose members are all over the age of 65. In the European context Italy is only 21st for Internet penetration, with a European mean of 65%, leading countries such has the Netherlands and Sweden have over 83% Internet penetration. Still it is important to underline that the higher level of computer and internet use in Italy is detected among 11-19 years old, with a percentage of respectively 89% and 82%. For what concerns mobile phones, the penetration is almost complete, even higher than television. Families "with minors" possess 2 or more mobile phones in 92% of the cases.

Just like almost everything else, the spread of ICT among youth has (many) ups and some downs, one of the latter being the risk of cyberbullyism. In fact, according to some studies, bullying and harassment are the most frequent threats that young people face online. (Palfrey et al. 2008). A broad definition of "cyberbullyism" is "bullying and harassment of others by means of new electronic technologies, primarily mobile phones and the internet." (COAST ACTION 2008). To send aggressive or hate-ful sms texts and e-mails, to spread photos or videos with embarrassing contents or to make public private communications are among the most common forms of cyberbullying, which also envisages the creation of real "hate-pages" to collect insults against the victim.

While the definition of bullying is now quite specific and shared in the academic world, the one for cyberbullyism still has to reach a precise and recognized form. Among the different dimensions that researchers can take into account are the identities of the bully and the victim (if an adult is involved, as suggested by lawyer Parry Aftab, we should be talking about cyber-harassment) and the repetitiveness of the attack (Hinduja and Patchin 2009). This is one of the problems faced in research in this field, as the adoption of different definitions leads to various and non-comparable results. Moreover, it can be difficult as well for the kids involved to recognize certain experiences as "cyberbullying", (Withers and Sheldon 2008). The real numbers of this phenomenon are therefore still to be evaluated.

The first researches carried out in Italy on this subject (Saputo and Pisano 2008, Genta, Brighi and Guarini 2009) underline a diffusion of cyberbullying among Italian students, in line with the European figures. But the picture is still far from clear.

2.   The "Crescere imparando a gestire i conflitti" project

Between 2008 and 2009 the Comune di Milano, in collaboration with the Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore sponsored the educational project "Crescere imparando a gestire i conflitti"(To grow, learning how to manage conflicts). The main aim of the project was to promote a shared environment that would encourage students and school workers to take an active part in preventing the escalation

of conflict, contrasting incidents of violence or bullying. The training focused on providing better understanding of the differences and connections between conflict and violence, enhancing the participant abilities to read ones own and others' conflict dynamics in order to develop effective communication and relationship strategies for the pursuit of a goal. Among the different strategies existing for this objective, we decided to adopt school mediation.

School mediation (Cohen, 2005, Ardon and Baldry, 2003, Cowie and Sharp, 1996) is based on the idea of peer counselling: students learn techniques of active listening and facilitation of communication in order to help their peers to talk about conflicts and to find their own solutions for the management of conflicts:

> "Peer mediation is used as a preventive method to solve smaller conflicts before they turn to larger ones. The idea is to create a solution-oriented atmosphere where conflicts are seen as a part of every day life and their resolution as a positive challenge more than a difficult and unpleasant task" (Gelling 2007).

The broader aims of the research conducted during the project were:

o The reconstruction of the representation of conflict among the students, and the most widespread management techniques adopted;

o The monitoring of the situation regarding young people and conflict in and outside school, combined with the detection of the students' perceptions of the situation in their school before and after the training intervention;

o The collection of data on the use of new technologies and their impact on conflicts.

The relevance of ICT diffusion among Italian youth, underlined at the beginning of this paper and the significant impact that this phenomenon can have on the student's life, motivated us to dedicate a whole section of the project (both during the research and the training phase) to the role of ICT in the conflict management of youth. More specifically, the research intended to evaluate:

- Mobile and Internet diffusion
- Student's main activities with the Mobile and Internet
- Student's attitudes towards the Mobile and Internet
- Cyberbullying diffusion and characteristics

3.   Students, mobile phones and Internet: the quantitative research

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In order to answer the points above, a questionnaire was created and submitted to the students before the beginning of the training and at the end of it in two different but comparable versions.

The total sample of the first questionnaire consisted of 485 pupils, of which 318 girls (65.6%) and 161 boys (33.4%), attending middle school (49%) and high school (51%). The personal data collected showed no special features or anomalies in the sample: the respondents mostly came from families where the parents are still married, only in 22% of the cases were the parents separated, divorced or in different family situations. Regarding the socio-economic level, this was a sample of medium to high extraction: the parents of the interviewees had a high school diploma in 50% of cases (39% out of the total sample), and a university diploma in 30 % (25% out of the total sample). In more than half the cases they had an office job. The remaining half of the parents is distributed between freelance/creative work, entrepreneur, retired/unemployed / housewife and factory work.

The second questionnaire was submitted only to the students who had participated in the training course, and its main objective was to detect any changes in the representation of conflict and school environment, as well as in the favourite conflict management techniques chosen by the students interviewed. The total sample answering the second questionnaire consisted of 377 students, 64% female, 36% male, 65% from middle school and 35% from high school.

Among the students interviewed the use of mobile phones and Internet is widespread: 76% use the mobile phone several times a day, and 87% at least once a day while 83% of them are on the Internet several times a week, and 50% several times a day.

The activities most reported by the students are: surfing the Net, chat and the use of instant messaging programs, and the downloading of music or films.

Most of the respondents use the Internet alone. It may be interesting to underline that the average age of the sample is age 14, with 46% of the sample between 10 and 14.

We subsequently asked the students to answer a series of questions designed to estimate the frequency of a series of negative experiences that can be described as cyberbullying. In analyzing the responses it was necessary to take into account the criterion of reiteration that characterizes "bullying". This leads to the exclusion from the "victim" category those respondents who have reported isolated actions. The overall figure, definitely significant, shows that almost 70% of respondents report having experienced at least one episode of "virtual" attack. Looking more specifically at the figures, the students stated that they had suffered the following acts:

| Mean text message | 20% from a few times to always |

Mean comment on SNS	12% from a few times to always
Online gossip	13% from a few times to always
Diffusion of an embarrassing pic	9% from a few times to always
Diffusion of private message	6% from a few times to always
Telephone joke	62,5% from a few times to always
Stolen online identity	6% from a few times to always
Modification of SNS page	8% from a few times to always

The great disparity of the frequency of phone pranks and other incidents leads us to reconsider the data and suggests the need for separate analysis of this phenomenon, which might be characterized by factors differing from those characterizing the other forms of harassments indicated by the students.

Attacks occur mainly when children are at home, confirming one of the typical features of bullying via ICT. About 50% of the respondents personally know who has attacked them, 20% only know his identity and 30% do not know the identity of his assailant.

To better understand the characteristics of the phenomenon, the following analyses were carried out dividing the sample into two groups: those who were victims of at least two episodes of cyber attack (45% of the sample) and those who have never suffered cyberbullyism (55% of sample).The group of victims is composed of 246 students, of which 72% female and 28% male, aged between 11 and 19. Two age groups are particularly affected by this phenomenon, in fact 28% of the victims are between 12 or 13 years old, and 58% between 15 and 17. The group that has never suffered incidents of cyberbullying is composed of 203 students, of which 62% female and 38% male. The average age is slightly lower; in fact 54% of the sample is less than 13 years old.

The victims of cyberbullying are also those who report a higher use of ICT, although this difference is more marked in the frequency of internet access than on the mobile phone use. In line with the international findings it is possible to say that the use of technology increases the probability of becoming a victim of cyberbullying

Crosstab: Frequency of Internet use * cyberbullying victimization
Measure of direction

			Value
Nominale per intervallo	Eta	Dependent Frequency of Internet use	,196
		Dependent cyberbullying victimization	,282

An interesting question concerns the online activities carried out by the students. In fact, the group of victims significantly surpasses the non-victim group in the frequency of chat and instant messaging use; while the two groups are equal in the use of the Internet to do homework, and the group of non-victims exceeds the victims in the use of Internet to play.

With regards to the use of mobile phone, the variables that most distinguish the groups are the use of mobile phones to reconcile and say things, both nice and mean, that they would not be able to say face to face.

Overall, the group of victims shows a greater tendency to use information technology in their interpersonal relationships, both with a higher use of chat and social networking sites, and with more personal content of the messages transmitted through ICT.

The victims of cyberbullying, possibly as more assiduous users of technology, express the most polarized opinions on the positive aspects of ICT and the potential risks and online misconduct implemented by their peers. The victims agree on a higher level compared with non-victims to positive statements such as: with an sms text I can say what I really think to my friends, in MSN it's easier to share intimate things and support each other, my peers use Internet to make peace after a quarrel and to say nice things they would not be able to say in person. At the same time victims support statements such as: in Internet my peers publish photos of other people without their agreement, or their friend's private data, they gossip, fight, say mean or rude things they would not say in person.

Among the topics investigated by the questionnaire, three groups of questions aimed to assess the perceptions that students have of:
o   The frequency of episodes of conflicts in their school
o   The attitude of their school mates when assisting the aggression of a peer
O   The attitude of adults when witnessing a conflict among their pupils.

We created two scales, one combining the opinion expressed with regards to technology perception, which was called "Internet attitude", and the other summarizing the perception of peers and adults, which was called

"School atmosphere". It was then possible to compare the means of the group of victims and non-victims on these variables.

The groups significantly differ in almost all the variables detecting the frequency of aggression at school (except the purely physical kind). In the perception of schoolmates, as well as in that of adults, the most significant differences relate to the reported frequency of negative behaviours. The School atmosphere and Internet attitude scales also show significant differences among the two groups. The following table gives a more in depth observation of these differences:

	Group	N	Mean	Mean difference significance
At school some student is ridiculized	non victim	195	3,579	.004
	victim	243	3,827	
At school there is gossiping	non victim	195	3,466	.000
	victim	241	3,900	
At school some student is excluded	non victim	194	3,304	,031
	victim	241	3,522	
At school some student is offended or insulted	non victim	194	3,113	O,43
	victim	242	3,326	
At school students play cruel prank	non victim	195	2,559	.010
	victim	240	2,845	
At school some student is threatened	non victim	194	1,799	
	victim	241	1,995	
At school there are thefts	non victim	192	2,171	,008
	victim	241	2,477	
At school someone is teased online	non victim	179	1,715	,000
	victim	238	2,315	
When someone is teased, schoolmates join the tease	non victim	190	2,421	,000
	victim	238	2,857	
When someone is teased, schoolmates have fun and cheer	non victim	191	2,293	,001
	victim	235	2,642	
When someone is teased, schoolmates thinks it's ok to pick on him	non victim	187	2,229	0,28
	victim	234	2,487	
When someone is teased, schoolmates exclude the victim	non victim	186	2,596	0,30
	victim	237	2,852	

When someone is teased, schoolmates ask help to an adult	non victim	183	2,480	,000
	victim	232	1,944	
When someone is teased, adults are not around	non victim	185	2,848	,035
	victim	233	3,081	
When someone is teased, adults don't notice	non victim	185	2,443	,000
	victim	238	2,886	
When someone is teased, adults pretend not to notice	non victim	184	1,782	,000
	victim	233	2,176	
When someone is teased, adults minimize	non victim	185	2,043	,000
	victim	237	2,447	
Internet attitude	non victim	184	3,102	,000
	victim	235	3,503	
School atmosphere	non victim	173	2,589	,000
	victim	230	2,896	

Overall, it is possible to observe that the students who have had experiences of cyberbullying have a significantly more negative perception of their school environment. Victims most frequently reported incidents of teasing and exclusion. The students of the victim group also reported a higher frequency of negative reactions of the bystanders, whether peers or adults, faced with incidents of bullying among peers.

4.   Conclusions

The research has given a first depiction of the student's relationship with the mobile phone and Internet:

The diffusion of this technology is high among students in Milan, especially when compared with the national statistics. Almost all the students interviewed had access to mobile phones and Internet connections, in many cases on daily basis.

The research also detected the diffusion of phenomena of cyberbullying among students, with figures in line with the main European findings. Students report having received mean text messages and email, hurtful comments on their personal pages, the diffusion of online gossip and personal content (photos ad private communications).

Students' main activities when using mobile phones and Internet are surfing the Web, communicating via instant messaging programs or social network sites and downloading music or movies. It is possible to detect differences in the favourite activities of students who have experienced cyberbullyism and those who never have. The group of victims seems keener in using such technologies in their interpersonal relationships, to

communicate both nice and bad things they would not say in face to face interactions.

Differences have also been found in the perception of the school environment, both with regards to the perceived frequency of episodes of conflict and the perceived attitude of peer and adult bystanders. The victims of cyberbullying report a higher level of conflict in their school and a weaker supportive attitude in the bystanders.

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