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MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bullying, cyberbullying and Internet usage among young people in post-conflict Belfast

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Abstract: In this paper, we analyse the relationship between bullying, cyberbullying and Internet usage in the post-conflict city of Belfast, using the conceptual framework of social capital theory. Observing the results of a survey we conducted among young people, with the help of local partners, we found a paradox, according to which moderate Internet users claimed to have been more exposed to cyberbullying than heavy Internet users. In the observed context, cyberspace seems to be a more suitable place for verbal offences, in particular for vulgar messages, the high level of occurrence of which, compared to the offline environment, explains the high levels of cyberbullying. Moreover, our findings confirmed a gender pattern according to which males constitute a slight majority of bullying victims, while females are a significant majority among cyberbullying victims.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In this paper, we analyse the relationship between bullying, cyberbullying and Internet usage in the post-conflict city of Belfast. Conducting a survey among young people, we found that those youngsters, who use less the Internet, have been more exposed to cyberbullying. Vulgar messages seem to be the first cause of bullying online. We confirm also a gender pattern according to which males still suffering more offline bullying than online, and vice versa for females.

Subjects: Anthropology - Soc Sci; Communication Research Methods; Information & Communication Technology (ICT); Sociology of Science & Technology; Urban Sociology - Urban Studies; Urban Studies

Keywords: bullying; cyberbullying; Internet usage; Belfast; social capital; divided cities

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying in a post-conflict city in transition, seeking to inquire into the extent to which Internet usage promotes social capital.

This study is part of a wider research project, concerning the impact of the Internet on divided cities, in particular within a post-conflict context. A divided city can be defined as a city with divided urban space and a divided society caused by conflict (Savoldi & Ferraz de Abreu, 2014).

The entire research consists in a transversal study, aiming to verify if the Internet can constitute a bridge rather than (another) wall in this type of city (Savoldi, 2013), presenting either new glimmers of hope for healthy integration or simply perpetuating segregation or other legacies of the conflict.

Our study focuses on the case of Belfast, a post-conflict city where urban space displays a sedimented division (wall, communities segregation, separated public services, lack of cohesion, etc.), which is influencing the daily life of its citizens, but where there is a dynamic of reconciliation, characterized by dominant public awareness, and political and social effort oriented towards reconstruction and integration. Because of these characteristics, we considered this case as constituting an indicative context that could allow us to visualize the possible impact of the Internet on social capital in divided cities.

In the case of Belfast, bullying and cyberbullying can be related to sectarianism, but also to harassment, vulgar messages and threats of violence, among other things. We consider that these deviant behaviours can have consequences on urban transition and social capital. In this paper, we indicate how cyberbullying, social capital theory and the discourse on divided cities are intertwined, pointing out the specificities of Belfast. The need to contextualize the meaning of these phenomena in a post-conflict city has led us to compare bullying and cyberbullying among youth in Belfast, investigating whether Internet usage is a predictor of different levels of victimization, as well as identifying gender patterns.

We are conscious that bullying and cyberbullying can be considered different phenomena given that they belong to environments characterized by a distinct nature (online and offline). Given that it is very difficult to isolate the effects of the Internet from other variables, in this research we have considered bullying and cyberbullying as parallel phenomena, in order to better comprehend the differences between the two environments.

2. Cyberbullying, social capital and the city

Definitions of cyberbullying are mainly based on traditional bullying, which has been recognized as aggressive behaviour that is repeatedly and intentionally carried out against a defenceless victim (Olweus, 1993 in Sticca & Perren, 2012). Wong-Lo and Bullock (2011) defined cyberbullying as a category of bullying that occurs in the digital realm/medium of electronic text. Known also as electronic bullying and/or online bullying, it has been defined as a new method of harassment using technology such as social websites (Miller & Hufstедler, 2009, Beale & Hall, 2007 in Notar, Padgett, & Roden, 2013). Although Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) claimed that definitions of cyberbullying often include behaviours not covered by traditional definitions of bullying, other authors (Olweus, 2012; Weinstein & Selman, 2014) suggested minute differences between the online and the offline version of the phenomenon. Indeed, a large part of the current research suggests that the majority of cyberbullying is a direct extension of face-to-face bullying (Notar et al., 2013).

Bullying and cyberbullying can be conceptually framed by the social capital approach, with social capital constituting a central discourse in studying the impact of the Internet on divided cities. In fact, the difficult links among inclusion, cohesion and socio-economic well-being of divided cities, as illustrated by Gaffikin and Morrissey (2011), show the extent to which relationships among individuals, communities and groups are central. In particular, in a post-conflict context such as Belfast, where the city's structure and character reflect decades of society-wide sectarian conflict between the Irish nationalist (predominantly Catholic) and British unionist (predominantly Protestant) communities, the development of improved relationships between communities is fundamental for the reconciliation necessary to fostering a normalized urban situation. The principal peace-building programmes for Northern Ireland and Belfast, such as Shared Future—Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM, 2007), Good Relations Plan (Belfast City Council, 2007), or the European Union PEACE (EU, 2007–2013), have been specially focusing on social cohesion, community infrastructure, cross-border relations, merging peace-building with social capital discourse.

Social capital is about social relationships, and human social relationships have evolved along with society itself. Despite the diffusion of the concept, there is lack of consensus as regards the definition of social capital on the part of researchers (Field 2008, Portes 1998 in Neves, 2013). The most influential proponents of the concept are Pierre Bourdieu, James S. Coleman, Nan Lin and Robert Putnam. In our research, we began to approach the social capital concept, taking in account the definition of Neves (2012). This author, following the line of Bourdieu (1980) and Lin's (2001) has defined social capital as:

The resources that can be derived from our social networks (resources that are potentially available and can be mobilized from our social connections). [...] Examples of these resources would be emotional support, financial help, help finding a job, access to important information, etc. Social capital is, in a broad sense, more than the sum of our social networks. (p. 84)

According to Englander (2013), bullying consists in a way to gain social capital, and it has increased, alongside cyberbullying, during last decade. Nilan, Burgess, Hobbs, Threadgold, and Alexander (2015), conducting a qualitative research on cyberbullying, highlighted that young people engage in cyberbullying for managing social pressure and to earn social benefits. From a different angle, Sofo and Sofo (2013) have demonstrated how social capital can be eroded by cyberbullying. In particular, they claim that cyberbullying impacts negatively upon levels of social trust, social capital and overall positive regard for online interactions, promoting greater levels of social isolation. According to Kwan (2012), two aspects of social capital are related to involvement in cyberbullying: lower family social status and emotional support were found to promote such online activities. Kwan, studying Singaporean youth, shows that the intensity of Facebook usage and engagement in risky Facebook behaviours were related to involvement in Facebook bullying, drawing a strong positive correlation between Facebook bullying and school bullying.

3. Cyber bullying in Belfast

Northern Ireland created a special forum hosted by the National Children's Bureau NI for publicly discussing the issue of bullying: the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF). The membership of the NIABF is composed of over 20 regional statutory and voluntary organizations all acting together to end the bullying of children and young people. According to the Forum, bullying is

... the repeated use of power by one or more persons intentionally to hurt, harm or adversely affect the rights and needs of another or others. (NIABF, 2014, p. 5)

The Belfast Telegraph (2013, July 18) reported that cyberbullying came under the spotlight following a number of suicides in 2012, with a local politician defending that the Office for Internet Safety should do more to tackle cyberbullying on social media sites. The same article claimed that around

10% of teenagers admitted to having been bullied online. On the basis of the distribution of a questionnaire among 163 Northern Irish pupils aged between 11 and 18, NIABF (2007) reached different results, with 14% of pupils reporting having experienced bullying over the past couple of months and 8% experiencing cyberbullying. Bullying and cyberbullying need to be defined in every context; different environments can give “bullying” different meanings. In Belfast, these phenomena are also linked to the conflict and they can be clearly related to the division of identities (racial as well as religious and cultural), and one of their expressions is sectarianism. NIABF illustrated on its website some examples of behaviour that can be considered bullying, and among them appear: “A Catholic/Protestant child being pushed and kicked because of their religion”.

4. Methodology

With the aim to comparing bullying and cyberbullying in Belfast, we conducted field research, which led us to run a survey among youth between 15 and 30 years old. This special population segment was selected for the following reasons. Youngsters of Belfast and Northern Ireland currently continue to generally suffer the effects of the conflict, mainly because of segregation, a phenomenon that in the observed context is related to deprivation. Sectarianism and social exclusion continue to affect young people in Belfast and contribute to the generation of “anti-social” or offending behaviour (Haydon & Scraton, 2009). One example of that are the clashes caused by teenagers from some disadvantaged areas, which have been called “recreational riots”: a kind of anti-social behaviour that consists in creating disorder like throwing stones at people living on the other side of an interface, the nature of which is related to violence and exclusion rather than politics (Leonard, 2010). Moreover, young people between 15 and 30 years old are the most active users of the Internet in Great Britain, while Northern Irish adults remain the most cautious in the United Kingdom (Ofcom, 2012).

We collected 384 questionnaires. But due to limitations in terms of resources, we obtained the total number of questionnaires through two samples. Many of our questionnaires (238) were collected through a local umbrella organization called Youth Action Northern Ireland (YANI), which is the wider organization working with youth and social integration in the city. The remaining questionnaires (146) were collected through a local volunteer, on the basis of the exponential non-discriminative snowball method.

The first part of the questionnaire pertinent to this paper consisted of socio-demographic questions. The second part focused on Internet usage, which permitted us to classify the respondents within two main categories of Internet users (heavy and moderate users). And in the third part of the questionnaire, we indicated several negative experiences that can characterize bullying in Belfast and asked if the respondent has lived them more online or offline in the last 12 months.

All the respondents of our survey were informed, from the beginning, about the aim of the survey and the protection of confidentiality. The information on the survey being anonymous was conveyed both verbally as well as in written form, at the beginning on the questionnaire sheet. Moreover, the respondents were informed as to where they could find further information and results of the survey.

5. Representativity of the sample

Due to the similarity of the samples collected through YANI and the one we collected through our volunteer, we considered them in a single analysis. This similarity was expressed in terms of the socio-economic conditions of the respondents and their spatial distribution in relation to segregation. Approximately, 45% of the respondents come from the most segregated areas, according to a definition of segregation that considers identity issues, crime and multiple deprivation factors (giving them the same weight), on the spatial basis of the electoral ward (the smallest administrative spatial unity available). The age average of the respondents was 19.7 years old. In terms of gender, females were the majority (50%); males were the minority (42%); 8% of the respondents did not

specify gender. Considering the average at the moment the survey was conducted, 42% were still studying, 27% were employed and 31% were unemployed.

In term of the familial financial situation, the majority of respondents considered their situation as average, not poor, and at times even well off. In terms of religious identity, both samples were composed of a slight majority of young people who came from a Catholic background. As regards nationality, there were a few more young people with Irish, rather than British, nationality.

The quantitative analysis carried out was limited by the fact that we obtained two non-probabilistic samples of convenience. As such, our results cannot be generalized to a whole population, and they are intended to be indicative.

6. Internet user classification

All the respondents were Internet users. Considering that results showed a similar trend of usage among respondents, we divided the users into two classes: moderate users and heavy users. The main criterion for conceptualization of these classes concerns the complexity of the online experience, considering that a more “variegated” or sophisticated usage gives users a more articulate experience of the Internet, allowing them to better exploit the benefits of the latter.

6.1. The heavy user class

The heavy class was characterized by respondents who:

- Connect to the Internet from more than one device (53%)
- Conduct a wider range of activities: activities carried out over the average, consisting in 10 activities per person (39%)
- Have a wider creation of content: done it or interested in doing this (59%)
- Use the Social Network Sites (SNS) in a more intensive way:
 - More than 1 account (43%)
 - Number of activities carried out on SNS over the average, corresponding to 7 activities per person (47%)
 - Connect to SNS more than once a day (65%)

6.2. The moderate user class

The moderate class of Internet users was composed of respondents who:

- Connect to the Internet from only one device or with a device belonging to somebody else (47%)
- Use the Internet to conduct the most common activities, or a number of activities up to the average, consisting in 10 activities per person (61%)
- Lower creation of content: not interested or don't know (41%)
- Lower use of SNS
 - 0 or 1 account only (57%)
 - Number of activities carried out on SNS up to the average, corresponding to 7 activities per person (53%)
 - Connect to SNS once a day or less (35%)

Combining the factors, we obtained two categories. The moderate class includes 226 participants (59.6%) and the heavy class is composed by 158 participants (40.4%).

7. Results

The response rate for the survey was 92%.

Figures 1–3 illustrate the findings.

7.1. A global view on collected data

Looking at Figure 1 we observe that:

- Slightly more than half of the respondents (52%) claimed that they did not experience any kind of violence indicated by the questionnaire during the last 12 months.
- Among the respondents who claimed to have suffered more bullying than cyberbullying during the last 12 months, there are no big differences between heavy Internet users and moderate users.

Figure 1. Victims online and offline, and Internet usage.

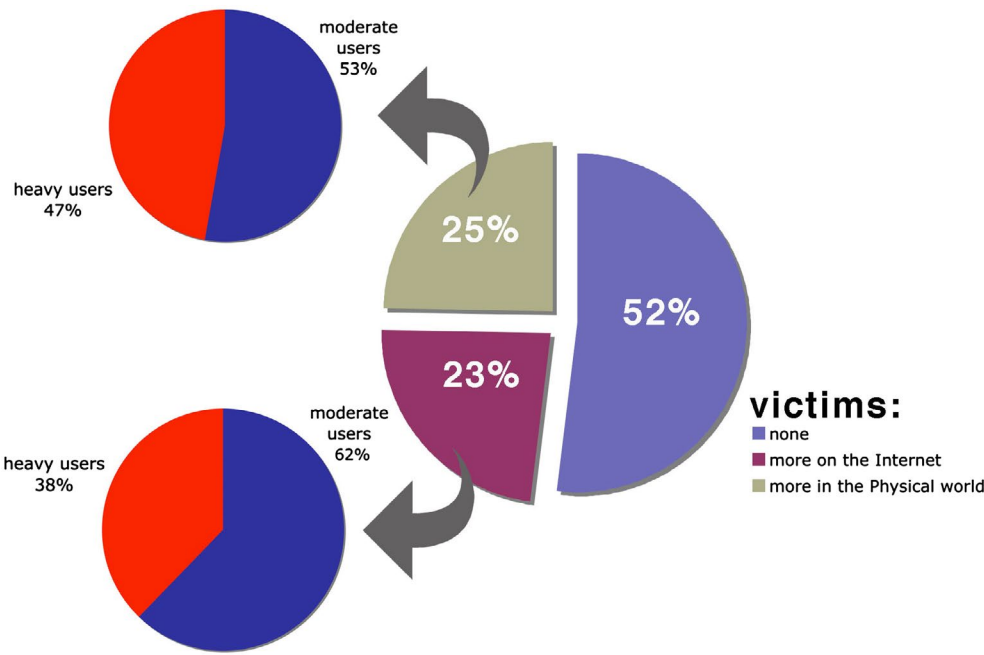


Figure 2. Type of bullying and cyberbullying.

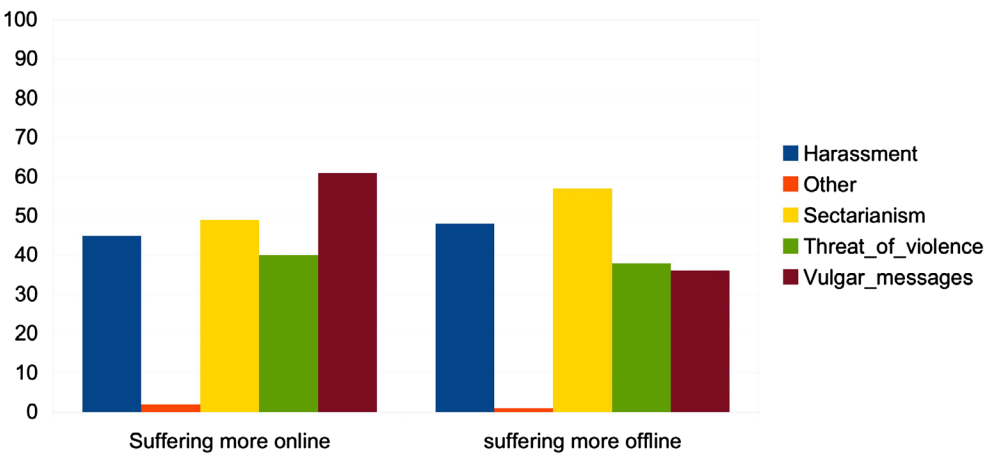
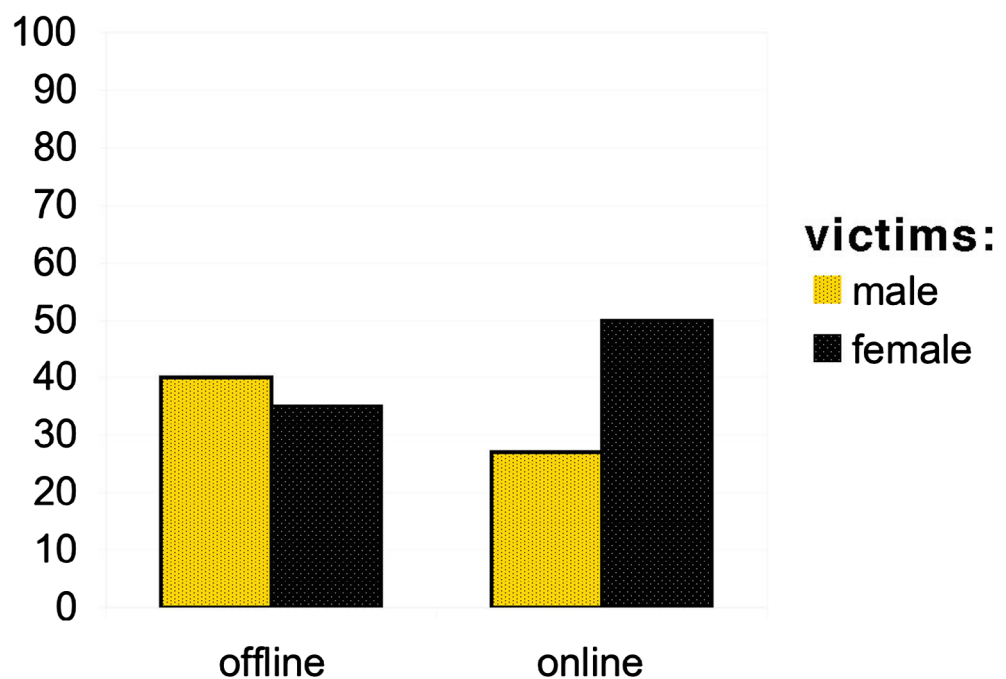


Figure 3. Bullying, cyberbullying and gender patterns.



- Curiously, we can note that among respondents who alleged having been more a victim of cyberbullying than bullying, there are more moderate users than heavy users. This can be understood as a paradox. In fact, precedent studies on the exposition to cyberbullying related it to the time spent on the Internet, showing a positive correlation between intensive Internet usage and being targeted as a victim of cyberbullying (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, & Russell, 2008; Walrave & Heirman, 2009). Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, and Olafsson (2011) claimed that a larger individual repertoire of online activities is related to risky online behaviour, such as cyberbullying; Festl, Scharkow, and Quandt (2013) revealed that frequent and intensive use of the Internet correlates with an enhanced risk of becoming involved in cyberbullying, for both perpetrators and victims in particular.

At this point, we have to remember that our classes of Internet users were created not only on the base of frequency of the Internet connection, but also referring to a degree of “sophistication” of usage. So, we are forced to confront the evidence that among the respondents, those who used the Internet in a more “sophisticated” way have been victims of cyberbullying less often than moderate users.

7.1.1. Bullying, cyberbullying, segregation and walls

With the aim of explaining the reason for this paradox, we have tried to find a contextual predictor. We have compared this data with contextual indicators on a spatial basis.

Considering that the Internet enables contact among people, who in the physical world would perhaps not have the chance to interrelate with each other we have compared the distribution of the prevalence of bullying on cyberbullying, or vice versa, with an index of segregation we created on the basis of the electoral ward (the smallest administrative spatial unity available). This index intended to map segregation as a social process that could overcome a simple distribution of identities, but that also considered also factors such as crime and multiple deprivation, given that poverty, segregation and conflict are three intertwined variables in Belfast; in fact those areas which are more segregated are often the most economically and socially disadvantaged.

The hypothesis was that in the most segregated wards, as well as closer to the bigger walls (peace lines), there is prevalence of cyberbullying over bullying because the offline contact happens with less frequency and also because in some cases it coincides with an elevated level of antisocial behaviour, which would presumably facilitate the use of the Internet as a tool for offence. However, the results revealed no correlation between the prevalence of cyberbullying over bullying in the most segregated wards. The same situation happens with the peace walls: there is no correlation between the prevalence of cyberbullying over bullying in those areas in close vicinity to a peace wall.

7.2. A view on the disaggregated data

Given that we could not find a contextual predictor able to explain the paradox, we analysed the details of this data. If we observe in Figure 2 the comparison of the different violent experiences online and offline, we can immediately note some characteristics:

- The most visible difference among the online and offline experience is related to vulgar messages: the respondents claimed that they received more vulgar messages on the Internet than in the physical world. While the most common experience that is characterized as bullying is sectarianism, vulgar messages are what most characterize cyberbullying. The respondents who experienced online vulgar messages are 42% heavy users and 58% moderate Internet users. As such, this is the factor that identifies the reason for the prevalence of moderate users over heavy users among the young people who suffer more cyberbullying than bullying.
- Precedent studies have illuminated the existence of gender patterns in bullying and cyberbullying. Kwan (2012) claims that gender, more so than race and age, is related to bullying. Chadwick (2014) shows that females in general carry out the majority of cyberbullying, and it is consistent with the types of indirect bullying offline; while males tend to do more bullying offline, involving physical clashes. The same author also claims that females prefer to engage in cyberbullying indirectly, using relational means. Buelga, Cava, and Musitu (2010) claimed that females are more often victims of cyberbullying than males. So, we checked if this pattern was verified in our context. In Figure 3, we can see the relationship between bullying offline and cyberbullying, according to gender patterns. As we can observe, males constitute a slight majority of bullying victims, while females are a significant majority among cyberbullying victims. This seems to corroborate the pattern identified by Buelga et al. (2010). On the other hand, according to Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (2014), in recent years, there has been an increase in violence among girls in Belfast. If we are to accept the theory that girls tend to use relational means in bullying, than it would seem that the cybernetic environment would favour this different kind of bullying.
- Sectarianism as a consequence of the conflict is still a very common phenomenon among young people, both online and offline, even if in the physical world it seems to be more extended than in the virtual world. Sectarianism in Belfast refers to invoking religious differences to invoke political differences and it can be considered a social marker through which conflict is articulated rather than as a source of conflict in its own right (Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum, 2014).
- According to our results, harassment is quite common among the participants and it is also reflected in cyberspace, even if it seems slightly more common offline than online. Harassment is another word to express violence that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for someone. It can be related also to division; Equality Legislation (Equal Opportunity Unit, 2013) defined it as "unwanted conduct" related to religious belief, political opinion, sex gender reassignment, race, sexual orientation or disability, and having the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or of creating an intimidating hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person.
- We included the "threat of violence" as a more general answer option, intended to capture other forms of violence, besides the ones specified. The results show a significant acknowledgement of this presence among young people, both offline and online, without a significant difference between the two.

8. Conclusion

Bullying and cyberbullying refer to deviant behaviours that can influence social capital and, which have different meanings in different contexts. In Belfast, these actions have an obvious link with the situation of post-conflict.

In this research, we have considered cyberbullying as a parallel online modality of bullying, which consists in deviant behaviour that in different contexts can have different meanings.

In the process of examining whether different levels of Internet usage can be correlated to different types of victimization among young people in Belfast, we have seen that bullying and cyberbullying are extended phenomena: 48% of the respondents claimed to have been bullied during the last 12 months; almost half of them said they had suffered it more online than offline. However, because of limitations in the data gathering process, we have to keep in mind that these results are indicative.

Concerning the two classes considered, “heavy users” and “moderate users”, there is not a substantial difference between those who claimed to have suffered more offline bullying than cyberbullying. But, among those who have been more victimized in the online environment than in the physical world, there were more moderate users. This is in some way a paradox, if we consider that precedent studies have underlined that intensive use of the Internet correlates with a higher risk of having been involved in cyberbullying.

In sum, in certain social contexts such as a divided city, cyberspace seems to constitute a new place for increasing verbal offence. This can be related to the nature of the Internet, which may allow bullies to remain anonymous and avoid immediate physical confrontation. What we still need to understand is whether this online vulgar message venting is substituting for other forms of violence or consists in just an additional one; it would be especially interesting to clarify this issue in a context of transition such as Belfast, from a post-conflict to a normalized situation.

Moreover, regarding the approach of bullying and cyberbullying through social capital theory, there is still the need to identify in detail how these phenomena can be framed according to the dimensions that characterize social capital, and in particular how they could be included as an item in the social capital measurement scale.

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