

# THE DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASSMATES' INTERACTION AND JUST-FOR-FUN ONLINE HARASSMENT

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**Abstract:** Bullying in cyber-space is also known as cyber-bullying which is usually described as an intentional aggressive action that is performed by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of communication, repeatedly and over time against another individual who cannot easily defend himself or herself in cyberspace. Cyber-bullying has exponentially increased in recent years, as the accessibility and use of electronic devices such as computers, laptops, tablets and smart-phones by young individuals has expanded. The project *Keeping youth safe from*

*Cyberbullying*, ID 2016-3-TR01-KA205-036619 under Erasmus+, was developed by our team with the purpose to deeper understand the dynamics of cyberbullying in online environments among youth, to develop educational resources for professionals involved in youth activities in order to prevent these type behaviors, to develop youth skills to protect themselves from cyberbullying and to disseminate findings among educational professionals. Present study aims to analyze the relationship between classmate's interaction and just-for-fun online harassment. We start from the assumption that the two variables are in a dynamic relationship. In order to test our dynamical hypothesis, we have used a confirmatory factor analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, just-for-fun online harassment was the dependent variable. Conclusions and implications are discussed.

**Key words:** cyberbully, harassmen, relationship

## **Introduction**

In literature, bullying is usually defined as being an intentional aggressive action or behavior that is performed by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against another individual who is perceived as being weak and unable to defend himself or herself (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2006). In modern times, where technology is evolving at an increasing rate, and where social-media and the internet are deeply rooted in our contemporary society, bullying can also take place in cyber-space. Therefore, bullying in cyber-space is also known as cyber-bullying which is usually described as an intentional aggressive action that is performed by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of communication, repeatedly and over time against another individual who cannot easily defend himself or herself in cyberspace (Lile, 2017; Smith et al., 2006). Cyber-bullying has exponentially increased in recent years, as the accessibility and use of electronic devices such as computers, laptops, tablets and smart-phones by young individuals has expanded (Lile, 2017).

There are many reasons that can offer explanations on the bullying phenomenon, such as: personality features, negative social and family context and the perception that the bully is more physically capable than the victim (Wilton & Campbell, 2011). When it comes to cyber-bullying, one of the reasons discussed in literature can be victimization (Akbulut, 2010). In this light, young individuals who were victims in a way or another tend to use

electronic forms of communication to bully other individuals in cyberspace in order to cope with the victimization situation. Literature also states that traditional bullies can emerge from victimization (Wilton & Campbell, 2011; Lile, 2017). Cyberspace can offer anonymity (Wilton & Campbell, 2011; Lile, 2017) and the perceived aggressor versus victim situation can change in cyberspace. The cyber-bully can be anyone; they don't necessarily need to be physically strong, they can easily be the victims of traditional bullying, trying to plot an act of revenge (Compton et al., 2014) against the persons who wronged them. The perception of anonymity can eliminate social disapproval and concerns of being found out or punished (Willard, 2005; Wilton & Campbell, 2011). The lack of face to face contact in the cyber-bullying phenomenon can reduce empathy levels of the cyber-bully (Smith et al., 2008), mainly because the bully can't physically see what is happening to the victim. Literature also showed that traditional bullies can engage in cyber-bullying as well, and traditional victims can be cyber-victims as well (Li, 2010).

Other reasons that can motivate young individuals to engage in online harassment can be the fun factor (Smith et al., 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Compton et al., 2014; Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016). Like in traditional bullying, the fun component can serve as a good motivational factor to engage in cyber-bullying for the entertainment of one self and others without the concern of the victim's well being, especially if the face to face contact is absent. If physical contact is absent, then there is the possibility that the levels of empathy of the cyber-bully to become low (Smith et al., 2008).

Social relations and peer influence may also offer some explanations on cyber-bullying. For instance, a study from the literature showed that social anxiety, interpersonal difficulties to communicate with peers and close friends, and lack of appropriate social skills can increase the chances of becoming a cyber-victim (Navarro et al., 2012; Betts, 2016). In this light, if an individual suffers from social anxiety or if that individual lacks the appropriate social skills, and becomes a victim in cyberspace, then the chances to interact with others can decrease, because cyber-bullying can leave serious emotional scars, having the victim believe that he or she will never improve (Lile, 2017). As the online environment can offer total anonymity, in some cases, the cyber-bully can be a close friend, classmate or neighbor (Nilgün, 2016; Boyd, 2012). Other sources showed that more cyber-bullying happens where high classroom closeness in the offline and online friendship network is present (Heirman et al., 2015).

In this light, we try to investigate in this paper the potential relationship that the fun component has in the cyber-bullying phenomenon and how social relationships and classroom interactions can relate to online harassment.

## Research methodology

The project *Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying*, ID 2016-3-TR01-KA205-036619 under Erasmus+, was developed by our team with the purpose to deeper understand the dynamics of cyberbullying in online environments among youth, to develop educational resources for professionals involved in youth activities in order to prevent these type behaviors, to develop youth skills to protect themselves from cyberbullying and to disseminate findings among educational professionals. Among the first objectives, we have proposed to analyze the dynamics of online bullying incidents, starting from youth just-for-fun online harassment behavior. In this regard, our team has designed a 7 sections online questionnaire that aims to gather descriptive data, general perception about the frequency and typology of cyberbullying type incidents, perceptions about the safety of the educational environment and parental support and an auto evaluation scale centered on self-efficacy perceptions.

One of our main focus was in analyzing the relationship between classmates interaction and just-for-fun online harassment, due to the fact thatthe scientific literature depicts several aggressor type profiles based on the existent relationship with victim.

The two items that measured classmates interaction and just-for-fun online harassment: Item 13 – *Do you have a good relationship with your classmates?*; Item 28 – *Did you ever online harassed somebody, together with your mates, with the purpose of just having fun?*. Our online respondents' instruction was to rate items on a 1 to 5 Likert type scale, where 1 stands for strong disagreement and 5 reflects strong agreement with the statement.

Present study aims to analyze the relationship between classmate's interaction and just-for-fun online harassment. We start from the assumption that the two variables are in a dynamic relationship. In order to test our dynamical hypothesis, we have used a confirmatory factor analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects, just-for-fun online harassment was the dependent variable.

The study was conducted on a random sample of 92 participants aged 18-30, of both sexes, 10,9% masculine and 89,1% feminine, from both rural and urban environmental origins, with qualification levels ranging from high-school – 63% – to bachelor's and master's degree – 22,8% and 14,2%, respectively. While most participants – 68.2%, have between one and three years' experience with social media platforms, only 42.4%, have the same amount of experience with messaging platforms and 43.9%, between no experience and one yearexperience with social media platforms and messaging.

## Results

In order to test our hypothesis that states that between classmate's

interaction and just-for-fun online harassment there is a dynamic relationship, we have used a confirmatory factor analysis, based on multiple regression analysis for curvilinear effects.

In curvilinear relationships variables grow together until they reach a certain point (positive relationship) and then one of them increases while the other decreases (negative relationship) or vice-versa.

There is a very high correlation between classmate's interaction – Item 13 (MD=4,52, SD=0,654) and just-for-fun online harassment– Item 28 (MD=1,03, SD=0,179) of  $r = -0,335$  significant at a  $p < 0,01$  which methodologically allows us to proceed with confirmatory factor analysis.

For curvilinear relationship testing, the present study proposes a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the dependent variable being just-for-fun online harassment, and the independent variable in step 1 classmate's interaction, and in step 2 squared classmate's interaction.

Table 1 presents the fitting of the two models, linear – Model 1 and curvilinear/ quadratic – Model 2. As we can see in Model 1 the model that supposes linear relationship, just-for-fun online harassment accounts for 10% of the variance in classmate's interaction with an  $F = 11.400$  significant at a  $p < 0,01$ . In Model 2, the model that supposes curvilinear relationship, just-for-fun online harassment accounts for 23% of the variance in classmate's interaction with an  $F = 16.267$  significant at a  $p < 0,01$ .

**Table 1.** Linear and curvilinear regression models for just-for-fun online harassment depending on classmate's interaction.

#### Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
item28	1.03	.179	92
Good relations with pupils from class	4.52	.654	92
pupilsclassesqrt	20.8696	5.32301	9

#### Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.335 <sup>a</sup>	.112	.103	.169	.112	11.400	1	90	.001
2	.500 <sup>b</sup>	.250	.233	.156	.137	16.267	1	89	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Good relations with pupils from class

b. Predictors: (Constant), Good relations with pupils from class, pupilsclassesqrt

**ANOVA<sup>a</sup>**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.326	1	.326	11.400	.001 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	2.576	90	.029		
	Total	2.902	91			
2	Regression	.724	2	.362	14.801	.000 <sup>c</sup>
	Residual	2.178	89	.024		
	Total	2.902	91			

a. Dependent Variable: item28

b. Predictors: (Constant), Good relations with pupils from class

c. Predictors: (Constant), Good relations with pupils from class, pupilsclassesqrt

**Coefficients<sup>a</sup>**

BetaModel		Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
1	(Constant)	1.446	.124		11.681	.000
	Good relations with pupils from class	-.092	.027	-.335	-3.376	.001
2	(Constant)	2.943	.388		7.579	.000
	Good relations with pupils from class	-.865	.193	-3.169	-4.472	.000
	pupilsclassesqrt	.096	.024	2.858	4.033	.000

a. Dependent Variable: item28

**Legend:**

Item 13 – *Do you have a good relationship with your classmates?*

Item 28 – *Did you ever online harassed somebody, together with your mates, with the purpose of just having fun?*

All standardized coefficients of Beta (B= -0,335; B= -3,169 and B= 2,858) are significant at p values < 0,01 which gives a high consistency to our both models. Changing Beta coefficient's sign from + to - means that the effect is growing in the opposite direction, which demonstrates the curvilinear relationship between classmate's interaction and just-for-fun online harassment. The additional incremental predictive capacity of 13 percent, added by including the squared classmate's interaction variable which is accounting for the band in the regression line, clearly prove that there is a dynamic relationship between classmate's interaction and just-for-fun online harassment.

This dynamic relationship demonstrates that best friends and as well as not knowing anything about your classmate (extreme aspects of classmates' interactions) gives incentives for the just-for-fun type of online harassment, while situating on the middle continuum in between extreme aspects of classmates' interactions is associated with an almost zero just-for-fun type of online harassment. Thus, a balanced classmates' interactions ensures youth not to engage in just-for-fun type of online harassment.

Until now, we are not aware of any research proving this dynamic relationship between classmate's interaction and just-for-fun online harassment, thus, this study may help expanding the current body of knowledge on psychological reasons that stand behind bullying incidents.

## **Conclusions and discussions**

We can argue that just-for fun harassment can translate, at least to some extent if not all the way through into teasing. While some literature tends refers to bullying and teasing interchangeably, thus implying they are synonyms, we would argue that the terms are actually very different.

We would also mention that we do not consider teasing as a form of bullying but more like a form of play, in the form of a simulated attack, to the same extent to which tickling for instance, can be considered a form of simulated attack while bullying is, by all means, an act of deliberate aggression.

The semantic differences become important especially when facing study results like the ones presented within this paper. Why? Because *bullying just for fun*, especially along with mates can only be considered a collective act of aggression against a person or group by another person or group with the purpose of expressing dominance and boost self-esteem by humiliating. Obviously, the fun component of the activity has to be present within the act: it's one of the elements which cause group cohesion while the act is undertaken,



a poor, yet convenient translation of the aggressive act into a socially-acceptable behavior on grounds that the activity implies fun which can be indulged. This mechanism ensures guilt is felt only as much as it is felt when indulging in what is called *guilty pleasure*.

Thus, the core differences between *bullying just for fun* and *teasing* are emphasized by at least two dimensions: (a) intent of the teaser, and (b) perception of said intent by the teased. While victims of bullying are supposed to feel humiliated, thus fueling the self-esteem of the perpetrator, *victims of teasing* are not supposed to feel humiliated at all, but rather amused in a self-ridiculing way. This shift occurs precisely because of the shift in perceived intention of the teaser, possibly coupled with the intensity of the act.

Since the provided comparison defines teasing as an act of simulated attack, the intensity of the attack must obviously be taken into consideration, since the simulation can grow out of proportions, becoming a full blown attack which even if perceived as simulated at first, may quickly change perception if its intensity exceeds a certain threshold: tickling is fun; but if it's too intense for too long, it quickly becomes reason for negative response – pleasure turns to pain, laughter becomes screaming and excitement degenerates into anxiety, turning fun into anger.

Even if the intent of the teaser is only to tease, that is to simulate an attack, the intensity of the act has to be proportional to the expectations of the teased and within his/her threshold of what is considered acceptable and what is considered going too far. If exceeded, the acceptance of the play gives way to suspicion of malice at best, while in worst cases it shifts to downright bullying.

Differentiating the terms in such way offers some obvious explanations as to why different levels of acquaintance to potential *teasing mates* or bully victims predict the incidence of such acts.

Since – virtually – strangers are emotionally meaningless, they are potential candidates for both bully and teasing, depending on the perpetrator's intent: If the intent is to become acquainted, teasing may prove surprisingly efficient for engaging in conversation. A risky tactic precisely since the lack of information about a person's threshold on accepted teasing may send the wrong message. Still, the tactic is commonplace among youth since its effectiveness in case of success and associated outcome anticipatory excitement. If the intent is solely to bully, then the intensity of the act will most likely be aimed at causing downright harm or humiliation. Even so, with strangers, risks are taken which may provide solid grounds for engaging in such behavior to begin with. Namely, the bully act may backfire, and if it does, the bully becomes not only a victim, but the kind of victim that doesn't even deserve compassion, since he/she's *been asking for it*. Suddenly, the prey becomes predator – a rare, but particularly satisfying sight in nature.



While *picking* on strangers may yield various results, each of which may be aimed at by the initiator, close acquaintances and friends are prone to teasing or even – what we could name – teasing sessions: a conversational session in which mean, yet amusing arguments are played, at a certain pace, within certain contexts, taking the shape of either a competitive game or a *payback* session. The game is won by the best, as in funniest mean comment/argument, while the payback session ends with the champion of previous/other sessions finally getting ridiculed. Given the close relationship between the players, the intimate nature of the game which often involves knowledge of personal or even intimate information, implies that intruders/outsideers are excluded and may not participate. Any intrusion will be heavily penalized, attracting the displeasure of the entire group. Fair-play is as important in these sessions as it is in any game if not more so, since the aggressive and personal nature of the game makes it easy to truly offend or embarrass a player up to the point where mild/acceptable embarrassment turns into humiliation.

While the potential progression from bully to teasing manifests in the case of strangers, the same progression is inverted in the case of friends/friend groups: from teasing to bully. Hypothetically, if both progressions are distributed along an axis, measured by acquaintance levels, an area where they zero-out would be present at their intersection, which may explain why, average, collegial relationships indicate lack of bullying or teasing.

Since collegial relationships imply a certain degree of acquaintance, not enough to befriend yet more than complete strangers would share, they are allegedly intended – by either part – to be kept that way. This type of relationship, *the acquaintance*, or *the colleague* is best suited for either formal or collaboration relationships. It may well be that the need to also have such relationships keep individuals from engaging in either bully or teasing, since it would accomplish nothing but shift the relationship upwards – towards friendship – or downwards – towards enemy, neither of which is intended or desired.

While the conclusions presented here are mere speculations which do not directly derive from study results, we plan on designing a number of experimental studies aimed at thoroughly defining and explaining teasing and its dynamics in contrast with bullying, in order to precisely identify how the above mentioned progressions take place, under what circumstances, and whether or not they can be considered generic, human social behavior or just an age or culture related activity.

\*\*\*This research was financed by European Union, inside the project *Keeping youth safe from Cyberbullying*, ID 2016-3-TR01-KA205-036619.

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