Relative Anonymity: Young People's Perceptions of Cyber Bullying

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Abstract: This paper addresses the perceptions and experiences of cyber bullying that young people make in the context of anonymous online profiles. This includes the topic how hurtful such behaviour is perceived. Morevover, the question is raised in how far such experiences might even relativise the anonymity on the internet from the perspective of those affected. This is based in empirical data of 40 qualitative interviews of adolescents from Germany who were thirteen to seventeen years old. The explorative examination was based in the Grounded Theory. The findings demonstrate the severe impairment that some victims perceive, especially against anonymous and multiple online profile with which they particularly identified themselves and in which they invested a lot of time and effort. This kind of victimisation could even damage the perceived integrity of their online profiles as well as the integrity of their own persona. Overall, the findings indicate that it is worthwhile to consider the individual perceptions of people affected by cyber bullying much more in criminological research, but also in criminal justice.

Keywords: cyber bullying, relative anonymity, integrity, perception

1. Introduction

Since the late 2000s, the empirical research, professional practice, public and politics have increasingly devoted themselves to the dangers and challenges of electronic communication on the internet and with smartphones. In addition to, but also distinct from bullying, the concept of cyber bullying has increasingly emancipated itself to explain these, and the specifics of the internet and social media have been outlined (Menesini et al., 2012; Nocentini et al., 2010; XXX, 2021). Moreover, there is a growing discourse and evidence on the importance of the perceptions of cyber bullying on the part of those affected, which have proved to be essential to this issue (Dennehy et al., 2020; Schultze-Krumbholz, Höher, Fiebig & Scheithauer, 2014; XXX, 2021). A central

aspect of this is the debate on the extent and meaning of anonymity. This includes, for example, the controversy about how anonymous those involved actually are. In addition, there is disagreement as to whether these affected persons suffer more from cyber bullying by people they do or do not know. The rather complementary and non-contradictory positions associated with this illustrate the complexity of the issue as well as the manifold challenges for the latter involved in dealing with and processing cyber bullying.

The aspect of anonymity deserves further academic attention and scrutiny. For example, it is becoming increasingly apparent that young people often no longer make a strict distinction between the virtual and the real world, as their communication is no longer based in such boundaries; more likely, there are fluid transitions for them here (Dennehy et al., 2020). From their perspective, it is rather the roles and functions or characters they take on in different life worlds and settings that differ, which includes not least the use of anonymous and multiple online profiles in certain chat groups and online communities, e.g. of games. This is because not only the aggressors, but also the victims of cyber bullying are often unknown to each other, as they also act anonymously. Therefore, 1. the empirical question arises as to how hurtful they perceive such affronts and attacks. However, we do not exclude the possibility that anonymous online profiles may actually serve the affected persons to let assaults by unknown persons get to them less than cyber bullying by known people, which are often specifically directed against one's own persona. Therefore, 2. the question arises as to whether such experiences relativise their anonymity on the internet from the perspective of those affected, if they have to experience that the supposed protection of anonymous online profiles does not have a protective effect, but makes them even more vulnerable. This includes the possibility that in chats, online games, etc., which young people regularly frequent, they may feel similarly violated by affronts and attacks against anonymous online profiles as they do by cyber bullying against profiles of their own persona. This raises the question of the extent to which they differentiate between those.

This paper adds to the growing body of criminological research by exploring the perceptions of those affected by cyber bullying from a study of 40 adolescents aged 13 to 17 from five major cities in Germany. Based on a qualitative study, initial insights into these questions can be derived. This is significant because it enables a greater understanding of the lifeworld and perception of those affected, which is essential for prevention and professional support, for instance, by criminal justice.

2. Anonymity and Relative Anonymity on the Internet

Early definitions of cyber bullying, as distinct from bullying, emphasised the importance of anonymity, which does not necessarily exist online but is more widespread than

offline where those involved usually meet face-to-face (Corby et al., 2016; Slonje & Smith, 2009). Since then, however, there has been controversy about how anonymous such actions actually are. This includes the opposing positions that actors are mostly unknown to each other (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Shariff, 2009) or regularly know each other (Abu Bakar, 2015; Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Mishna, Saini & Solomon, 2009). These two options, or hybrids thereof, are not mutually exclusive, but rather characterise the complexity of cyber bullying. For example, varying degrees of anonymity between participants can be expected simply by looking at different social media and internet platforms, i.e. due to the circles of people with whom one shares them, the intentions with which one uses them, as well as the respective private or public nature of these media (Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020). As a result, individuals may even prefer different areas of the internet for its varying degrees of anonymity in order to meet their own needs.

This, however, does not call into question the anonymity of parts of the internet and of cyber bullying, but divides them into certain segments where actors rather act anonymously or with multiple online profiles. Even in such areas, the supposed online anonymity is at least put into perspective by the fact that, for instance, according to Englander (2020), because of recent technical advancements in law enforcement, much cyber bullying is significantly less anonymous than those involved are aware of, since they can be identified if necessary. In addition, it was already known 20 years ago technically skilled young people are partly also able to remove the anonymity of others (Berson, 2003). Moreover, it is possible that in more or less familiar circles of people, actors with anonymous profiles can be "unmasked" through communication or by means of certain identifying features (Mishna et al., 2009).

From the resulting ambiguities, but also certainties, about the persona of other actors on the internet derives, among other things, the debate arises about how hurtful cyber bullying by anonymous persons is perceived to be. More specifically, this includes, on the one hand, the discourse on how damaging anonymity can be for trust in friends or people that they at least know (Englander, 2020; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2014). On the other hand, this touches on the controversy of whether cyber bullying by known or unknown persons is experienced as more hurtful. In favour of the former would be that such behaviour of known persons leads to particular disappointment and directly concerns those affected (Abu Bakar, 2015; Baas, de Jong, & Drossaert, 2013; Betts & Spenser, 2017; Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Corby et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2009). Therefore, this is experienced as hurtful especially in private and online settings. In favour of the latter, on the other hand, would be that it might be more difficult to defend oneself against unknown aggressors and that those, because they do not (directly) perceive the pain of the affected person, might be harder and more merciless, increasing their

feeling of helplessness (Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Jacobs, Goossens, Dehue, Völlink & Lechner, 2015; Shariff, 2009; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros & Oppenheim, 2012). However, Corby, Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, and Kift (2016) counter that greater anonymity may in part help victims to perceive the experience as less hurtful and more likely to dismiss it as meaningless.

Moreover, with the increasing penetration of the internet and social media in many areas of everyday life of young people, the boundary between the virtual and the real world – as rather still dichotomised by adults – seems to be blurring (Dennehy et al., 2020). While young people are of course able to differentiate, whether they communicate online or offline, they rather perceive both as different spaces than separate forms of communication. Especially interactions with peers often take place parallel via different channels and media, so that they rather differentiate between the respective groups of people, life worlds and topics than between the form of communication (Dennehy et al., 2020; Holfeld, 2014; Spears & Taddeo, 2021). Consequently, this makes it more important to distinguish between the roles and functions as well as characters that they take on in such interactions or that are attributed to them in negotiation processes by third parties (Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

The latter is particularly essential online because it favours the use of anonymous or multiple online profiles, i.e. these are used specifically in certain areas of the internet. This not only allows people to live out hidden interests (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008) and to shape their search for and formation of identity in creative and flexible manners (Aresta, Pedro, Santos & Moreira, 2014). Rather, this also serves as at least a perceived protection against cyber bullying by being able to present oneself in the way one wants (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Ševčíková, Šmahel and Otavová, 2012). Among others, young people who repeatedly experience bullying offline, which they then try to avoid online by a different demeanour, appearance and image (Englander, 2020; XXX, 2021), can use this. However, this also serves other internet users in the same way as well.

Especially with regard to those affected by cyber bullying, however, the explorative question arises as to what the use of such profiles means for them. After all, those do not fundamentally prevent victimisation, but in some cases even encourage it (Spears & Taddeo, 2021), and it is undisputed that this is perceived as hurtful (Corby et al., 2016). This inevitably leads to the question of how victims experience and perceive online affronts and attacks despite the use of anonymous and multiple profiles. Following Corby et al. (2016), it could be postulated that such profiles might serve to make cyber bullying less of an issue than attacks by known persons against one's own. However, this has to be investigated further, as it can be assumed that a large proportion of those affected do not have sufficient resilience and coping strategies to dismiss such experiences (Ybarra et al., 2012).

This leads to another criminological research gap on the level of the perception of the victims. It is unclear to what extent the latter are able to dismiss such experiences, especially against their anonymous online profiles, as rather trivial or whether such experiences are particularly stressful for them. If they realise, for instance, that the supposed protection of anonymous and multiple profiles has no effect, but makes them even more vulnerable, this could not only relativise the subjective perception of protection, but also their very integrity, especially in the case of a strong identification[1] with these profiles. For even if anonymity may remain intact on the outside, at least its integrity might be significantly impaired in the case of a massive violation from their view. Moreover, such identification could go so far that attacks against anonymous and multiple online profiles are perceived as similarly hurtful as against one's own persona. This addresses the question of the extent to which they differentiate between their own and alternative characters in these profiles. In conclusion, the question arises as to whether those affected not only relativise the integrity of such profiles, but also their anonymity, if their own persona has not been exposed but one or more of their anonymous profiles have been massively impaired.

3.   Methodology

Grounded theory was chosen because it can be used to inductively explore adolescents' perceptions of cyber bullying (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the massive increase in young people's use of the internet for social contact, a grounded theory approach was deemed most appropriate to elicit the perspectives of those affected and explore the complexity of their experiences. Unlike several qualitative studies in recent years on perceptions of cyber bullying, we conducted problem-centred interviews instead of focus groups (Leavy, 2016). This was done so because we mainly addressed the victim's perspective and in order to avoid interviewees showing inhibitions about speaking out on a highly taboo topic like cyber bullying in the presence of third parties. Therefore, an approach was preferred that enabled the respondents to speak out about these topics of the study in a light-hearted manner, i.e. not in front of peers, whose assessment as victims many young people fear and want to avoid (Englander, 2020).

This study did not require approval by an ethics committee due to the legal situation in Germany in the mid-2010s. Nevertheless, it was reviewed by the data protection officers of Bielefeld University, checked internally by the team for ethical issues, and continuously reflected on during the research process. The interviews each required a prior clarification of the contents of the study to the interviewees, of the purely scientific use of the data and of the anonymisation of the personal data. Moreover, the interviews were only conducted after the respondents had given their informed consent.

3.1. Participants

40 young people aged 13 to 17 from five major German cities were interviewed between 2014 and 2015. Seven female and 33 male adolescents took part.[2] The types of school attended or degrees obtained represented the entire spectrum in Germany. This contributed to the dispersion of the sample with regard to social origin, material situation and living areas. What all respondents had in common was that they owned a mobile or smartphone and additionally had access to the internet at home via a computer.

They were recruited by the interviewers in youth centres. Moreover, interviews were conducted in municipal educational support facilities. There was a random selection based on the sampling criteria as well as a spontaneous willingness to participate. Recruitment was done with the help, including active advocacy for the meaning of our work, of the institutions whose premises were used to conducting most of the interviews. Individual interviews were conducted elsewhere, e.g. on secluded park benches. It was essential that the interviewees should choose a place where they felt as comfortable and unobserved as possible in order to increase their sense of well-being and willingness to provide information.

3.2. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Due to the content of the study, problem-centred, reconstructive interviews (Leavy, 2016; Witzel, 1982) were the obvious choice, as they take into account the framework conditions of a social situation that are independent of subjective interpretations. Corresponding theory-based scientific presuppositions were incorporated into the creation of the interview guideline. The specification of a theoretical structure based on presuppositions, which – starting from the question and mediated via the comparative design – is finally reflected in the guideline, has two advantages. On the one hand, it ensured that targeted follow-up questions could be asked in the course of the interviews as soon as new aspects came up that contradicted the pre-assumptions or seemed less significant in advance. Secondly, this made it possible to contrast the data, which our comparative design cannot do without. The guideline for the problem-centred interviews was intended to cover all relevant topics and at the same time not to stifle the interaction dynamics of the interview conversation.

The problem-centred interviews began with a narrative-biographical introduction. This variant has proven itself in our earlier studies (e.g. XXX, 2021; XXX, 2020). On the one hand, it allows the particular biographical perspective and the subjective relevance of the interviewees to be elicited. On the other hand, narrative-biographical entrances or the "Zugzwang" that arise (Schütze, 1977) give the problem-centred interview section

additional drive. Especially in the case of sensitive topics, interviewees tend to be more uninhibited consequently and get into a flow of words.

The interview material was examined and interpreted in an analysis group, multi-stage and computer-assisted with the software MaxQDA. In order to do justice to the complexity of the individual cases, the interviews were coded and categorised in three steps using grounded theory. The first step of the analysis was open coding and linking the qualitative with the standardised data[3] in order to break down the material on a case-by-case basis. The second unit of analysis consisted of cross-case axial coding to identify patterns and differences between cases. The third unit of analysis involved an overall view of the results or selective coding, which was reflected back to the individual cases. This application step served to compare the patterns with the individual cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4.   Results

Using a qualitative methodology, young people's perceptions of cyber bullying were explored. The results provide rich insights into experiences and perceptions of cyber bullying against anonymous and multiple online profiles. These are consistent with, but complementary to, existing criminological research. The analysis yielded various insights into the themes derived in chapter two. These were, above all, 1. the everyday nature of attacks, not just against anonymous and multiple online profiles, 2. the burden on those affected by attacks by known or unknown persons, as well as 3. the perception of a relative anonymity from the perspective of those affected by massive impairment to the integrity of anonymous profiles, with which they strongly identified.

4.1. Affronts and Attacks against Anonymous and Multiple Online Profiles in Everyday Life

Although only a part of the respondents had already been targeted by cyber bullying themselves, all of them confirmed that affronts and attacks not just against anonymous and multiple online profiles were very common in the lifeworld of young people. They described this as "ubiquitous" and "omnipresent" in everyday life in various social media and the internet. Similar to Mishna et al. (2009) and XXX (2021), this was portrayed as "normality" and "very common", even though at the same time it was considered "problematic" and "burdensome" for those affected and bystanders associated with them. However, they also explained that it occurred in "varying degrees", i.e. "more or less severe", so that it partly happened to be was sometimes difficult for those involved to draw the demarcation line between (still) acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. The perception of the latter did not only vary between different actors, but individually depending on the situation and setting. Some people were generally "more sensitive",

others merely reacted "rather thin-skinned under certain conditions" or "behaved and reacted differently in certain social media or online settings".

4.2. Subjective Exposure to Online Attacks by known and Unknown Persons

The narratives of those affected show that they could experience cyber bullying by known as well as unknown people as "hurtful and serious". Insofar as, from their point of view, it was not fun, "harmless jokes at their expense", etc., the anonymity of the aggressors could be of secondary importance in this respect. Nevertheless, they subsequently differentiated on other levels when presenting their sense of stress to that effect.

They perceived forms and experiences of cyber bullying by known persons that involved "personal and confidential matters", i.e. when they "felt betrayed" and "mutual trust" was affected, as particularly hurtful. They experienced this as a damage to the integrity of their own persona in a social environment or in specific online contexts. In contrast, they perceived forms and experiences of cyber bullying by unknown persons as particularly stressful, if this questioned the "equality" or their role and function in an online setting. Thus, the integrity of one's own anonymous and multiple profiles could be particularly impaired if the "importance of the person concerned was not recognised" or "denied".

However, the data also show that it is possible for some people to "dismiss such experiences as rather trivial". Obviously, it turned out that this occurred if the integrity of an online profile of an affected person was not (too much) impaired by such behaviour. On the one hand, this could result from perceiving a rather "low degree" of cyber bullying, which is, however, a matter of personal opinion and therefore "difficult to assess" and understand for others involved. As already mentioned in 4.1, this made it even more difficult to "assess the limits" and "to define a behaviour as cyber bullying", which could thus be "relatively diffuse" and "easily crossed". On the other hand, the stability of the integrity of those affected could be based on their own resilience and coping strategies in dealing with certain affronts and attacks. Some interviewees reported that they "did not let such experiences get to them so easily", "knew how to deal with it" or "did not let it annoy them". In other words, the assessment of the perceived impairment was not only a matter of the severity of such actions, but also of their awareness of being strong and powerful.

4.3. Relative anonymity due to Massive Integrity Impairment to Anonymous Online Profiles

A central starting point for the analyses of the data material to this end was that it already became apparent during the interview phase and the coding process that a specific form

of relative anonymity of those affected was evident in the data. This was followed up in the explorative examinations, which enabled a closer look and more in-depth analysis.

It became apparent that those affected perceived it as a relativisation of the anonymity of their singular or multiple online profiles if there was a "massive impairment" up to a "loss of integrity". This was the case when the reputation, image and role or function of a profile was "significantly disrupted or damaged". They experienced this particularly seriously if they had purposefully "created and established with certain goals and intentions", which were seen to be endangered as a consequence. Especially in the case of large personal investments, e.g. "a lot of time", "effort", "emotions", "attachment to a chat or group", "the options of a certain media platform or an online game", etc., this was experienced as "similarly hurtful and stressful as attacks against one's own person" in other settings. Thus, although the persons affected differentiated in principle between anonymous profiles and their own persona, singular or some of their multiple "profiles could be perceived as similarly significant", if they "strongly identified with them". In many cases, this was because they had "built up a certain notoriety" in the respective contexts, as well as a reputation, image, role or function that meant much to them. As a consequence, cyber bullying against these profiles could lead to "so much impairment" that they not only saw their integrity damaged. Rather, they also experienced a loss or relativisation of the anonymity of these profiles, because such "damage was directed against a part of their person" or their online presence, with which, on the one hand, they themselves "felt very connected and identified". On the other hand, they were very hurt by the fact that this was "targeted against the notoriety and image" they had built up there. In a nutshell, they experienced themselves as less anonymous, even though this did not expose their real persona. This happened because such experiences massively questioned the meaning and integrity of essential online profiles.

5.   Discussion

The aim of this study was to collect perceptions of cyber bullying from the perspective of victims aged 13 to 17. The research was guided by how hurtful they experienced affronts and attacks against anonymous and multiple online profiles and whether this went so far that they saw both the integrity of these profiles massively damaged and thereby perceived their anonymity as relativised.

Through the analysis of the data, it became clear that the *subjective perceptions of those affected by cyber bullying* can only be truly understood and addressed by taking into account the individual and situational differences in varying contexts and online settings. Since cyber bullying can be directed against both anonymous and non-anonymous online profiles, it is necessary to study it in both contexts. Our own data confirms the wide prevalence of cyber bullying in many areas of social media and the

internet, which is consequently an integral part of the lifeworld of young people. Most interviewees felt at risk of becoming a victim of cyber bullying in the future or had already been victimised. Although such experiences were unwelcome, the findings suggest that this is perceived as pervasive, at least in certain areas of the internet. Similar to Mishna et al. (2009), this was therefore presented as something normal by the respondents.

According to the results, however, the young people differentiated strongly with regard to the individual characteristics of such experiences. It was not only those affected who found it difficult to distinguish between (still) acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Similar to Gimenez-Gualdo, Hunter, Durkin, Arnaiz and Maquilon (2015), some respondents were not even aware or were not sure whether certain experiences were cyber bullying or just regular normal social interactions among young people. It is important that parents, teachers, practitioners, etc. do not overlook this ignorance but take it into account when dealing with victims in order to strengthen their ability to assess their own situation.

This affects, among other things, the legitimacy of certain behaviour, which is both assessed differently by different actors in different situations and cannot always be clearly assessed specifically by those affected, as grey areas exist. In addition, some people are more "sensitive" than others, who only "react thin-skinned under certain conditions" or almost never, or "behave and react differently in certain social media or online environments than in others". Similar to Dennehy et al. (2020), there is a relatively wide range between individuals in this regard, but this is also individually situation and context dependent. These differences have to be considered further in order to understand, explain and address such behaviour.

Moreover, the study focused on the subjective *perception of cyber bullying in comparison between known and unknown persons*. Just as there is disagreement or different positions in the state of research on this, our own data also speak for the fact that those affected can experience this by both groups of people as hurtful and stressful. Thus, similar to Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2014), the relevance of anonymity can diminish as soon as young people feel much burdened by cyber bullying, and it then only matters to a limited extent whether they know each other. Nevertheless, this does not make this criterion of distinction obsolete; rather, this marks an essential facet of differentiation between victim experiences.

For they did indeed differentiate in their narratives with regard to their feelings of stress to that extent. Similar to, but complementary to Abu Bakar (2015), Baas et al. (2013), Betts and Spenser (2017), Bryce and Fraser (2013), Corby et al. (2016) and Mishna et al. (2009) the findings partly revealed that knowing the perpetrator can lead to a particular disappointment. In private and familiar online settings, people know

each other better and may exchange or have more personal information, which may cause more harm to the victims (Englander, 2020; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2014). This could particularly damage the integrity of one's own person, not least because of mutual acquaintance and familiarity it could draw even wider circles in the social environment that go beyond singular settings.

In contrast, respondents could also see it similar to, but complementary to Corby et al. (2016), Dennehy et al. (2020), Hinduja and Patchin (2015), Jacobs et al. (2015), Shariff (2009), and Ybarra et al. (2012) as a particular oppression when the perpetrators were unknown to them. This could limit their own options of reaction and resistance, as well as make the aggressors appear harder and more merciless, because they could not (directly) perceive the pain of the victims. In addition, such experiences contributed to their integrity suffering in the form of feeling no longer equal to others or of seeing their own role and function in an online setting questioned. Accordingly, the integrity of one's own anonymous and multiple profiles would be particularly affected if their importance in a setting was no longer recognised or denied. Since it can be seen that in both cases the integrity of the young people or their online profiles was damaged, both are to be taken equally seriously.

In addition, it happens that, as in Corby et al. (2016), an existing anonymity between the participants might serve victims to perceive certain experiences of cyber bullying as less hurtful and meaningless. Here again, it seemed to be significant whether the integrity of an online profile was massively affected. This went beyond a low assessment of the extent of the acts, which is always subject to a subjective bias of the participants and thus can sometimes remain diffuse between the actors. The main point was that some of those affected stabilise their integrity by being resilient or having adequate coping strategies in dealing with cyber bullying. This realisation should preferably be understood as a resource of these persons and less as a deficit of the others – at least not as long as adequate support and prevention offers can be derived from it that strengthen and support those affected. Further empirical scrutiny in criminology is necessary as it can be assumed that a large proportion of victims do not have sufficient resilience and coping strategies to dismiss such experiences (Ybarra et al., 2012).

Finally, the study addressed the problem of *relative anonymity*, which those affected could perceive in the case of massive damage to personally important anonymous online profiles. This is a research gap that, to the best of our knowledge, has not been addressed by academia to date. The findings on this emerged during the exploratory analysis of the data and due to the grounded theory-oriented openness to new empirical insights. It turned out that victims perceived it as relativising the anonymity of their profiles when there was massive damage or a loss of integrity. This could be, on the one hand, because their reputation, image and role or function in an online setting was severely

violated. On the other hand, this has been an essential profile to them in which they had invested a lot of time and energy or with which they strongly identified. Thus, the relativisation of anonymity consisted in the fact that they achieved a level of notoriety with such profiles – albeit among anonymous peers – which represented a significant "purpose in life" for them. Damage to these profiles could be perceived consequently as an impairment their own persona.

To the best of our knowledge, this insight has not yet been presented in this form by academia, i.e. as a specific experience of damage by those affected in the context of anonymity on the internet. Nevertheless, this finding can be connected to existing research. Thus, following but also differentiating from Corby et al. (2016), it can be demonstrated that only some of those affected are able to not let cyber bullying by unknown persons or against their anonymous online profiles get to them so much. Some respondents, similar to Ybarra et al. (2012), did not have sufficient or adequate resilience or coping strategies to counter it. In this sense, contrary to Hinduja and Patchin (2015) and Ševčíková et al. (2012), it was not possible for these victims to use anonymous profiles particularly in an effective manner of self-presentation that would have enabled them to avoid cyber bullying. Nevertheless, the data did not provide sufficient evidence as to whether the victims used their anonymous profiles at all specifically to perform online in a different way than offline for such reasons, which, for instance, Englander (2020) suggests.

Moreover, the new findings are connectable in that the respondents did not differentiate so much between online and offline in their communication or peer interactions, but between the circles of people, settings and content (Dennehy et al., 2020; Holfeld, 2014; Spears & Taddeo, 2021). This is why the roles and functions they assumed with their anonymous and multiple profiles had such great personal significance for them, and why the relevance and integrity of these profiles should be considered more in future criminological research.

Finally, the findings bring a further nuance to the discourse on exposure to and harm from unknown persons online. It has been repeatedly suggested that strangers are less aware of victims' pain and therefore act more harshly and mercilessly, thereby increasing victims' helplessness (Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2015; Shariff, 2009; Ybarra et al., 2012). To this must be added that the pain and helplessness of the victims might be potentiated when they experience cyber bullying in anonymous settings, with which they at least feel rather familiar, for instance, due to long-term involvement and strong identification. In other words, when the familiarity among the anonymous actors increases, as does the identification of the victims with their respective profiles, they might perceive affronts and attacks in such settings even more painfully.

5.1. Limitations

To ensure that the researchers did not remain entrenched in their own world of experience, it was important to ask about the lifeworld of the young people. However, as their perspectives and interpretations were collected through the use of qualitative methods, the results cannot be generalised beyond the experiences of the respondents in this sample, as it is not known to what extent their views apply to others. This is tangential to the lack of representativeness of the data, which cannot be remedied even by the aforementioned connectivity to the state of the art. Added to this are the limitations of the sample, which further restrict the generalisability of the findings and the informative value for other populations. Finally, it has to be considered that the interviews were already conducted some years ago and do not necessarily reflect all current trends and developments in online behaviour, which are in constant transition; not just due to technical achievements and the emergence of new providers of social media.

Furthermore, the data not only illustrates the relevance of a stronger consideration of subjective aspects in the empirical investigation and prevention of cyber bullying, but also further limitations of the state of the art. This is a fundamental problem with taboo research topics, but in the case of cyber bullying existes the additional fact that it is still something relatively new, so that there are various research gaps in areas where empirical studies are certainly possible and should prove fruitful. This leads to a need for further research, taking into account different methodological approaches in order to address this in different ways (e.g. with longitudinal studies) and with different research questions. Last but not least, further criminological studies on subjective pain and vulnerability as well as more in-depth studies on this issue are needed, that differentiate more between the target groups (e.g. gender, age, social origin, migration background, etc.) as well as variants of experienced cyber bullying (e.g. types of offences, modi operandi, different constellations of participants, experiences in different settings and online spaces, etc.).

5.2. Implications for pratice, policy and research

The results of this study are in line with the literature, which indicates that affronts and attacks against anonymous and multiple online profiles are not an exception but widespread and characterise the everyday life of young people. Although most of them are not constantly victimised, they are aware of the possible risks in different online settings (XXX, 2021). An important implication for the social environment of young people, but also for professionals who work in a preventive or interventional way, not least in criminal justice, is therefore not to close the eyes to this, to problematise it, but also to show ways how it can be avoided or reduced and how it can be dealt with. This

should not lead to a demonisation of the internet and social media and prohibitions for victims, because the latter is a central barrier for seeking help and support by third parties, especially their own parents (Dennehy et al., 2020; Mishna et al., 2009; Spears & Taddeo, 2021).

The finding that cyber bullying, similar to Gimenez-Gualdo et al. (2015), was sometimes not recognised by the respondents as a victim experience or that they were unsure which behaviours could be labeled as cyber bullying, highlights on the one hand a further need for prevention and intervention programmes in online and offline contexts. There is a need to increase more awareness and education among victims as well as other stakeholders and, if necessary, their social environment. In addition, the culture of declaring such behaviour as normal, especially in adolescence, i.e. as part of identity formation and finding one's identity as well as a „training" in self-assertion and one's own ability to assert oneself, must be counteracted (Englander, 2020; XXX, 2021).

This is followed by the discourse on the relevance of the reactions of those affected to the course and occurrence of cyber bullying. This affects, for instance, the question of whether individuals react situationally rather sensitively or thin-skinned to affronts and attacks against themselves, only under certain conditions or hardly ever let something like this get to them. On the one hand, there are a wide variety of characters and situational aspects that can favour this (Dennehy et al., 2020). On the other hand, those affected have different means and possibilities to prove resilient or to deal with cyber bullying in further ways that are either beneficial or harmful for themselves (Ybarra et al., 2012). As mentioned, there is a considerable need for research in this area in particular, but also challenges for professional practice. This is not least because it is very difficult and time-consuming to select and establish forms and ways of prevention and support against cyber bullying, which are appropriate for and adjusted to each individual. In addition, a lack of resilience and coping strategies should not be addressed as a personal deficit, but rather as an optional starting point for prevention and intervention. Since coping strategies can also be self-harming, it is necessary to clarify individually how young people deal with such experiences and at least consider whether their handling of it is not in part harmful as well. This would in turn require giving the young people other means and possibilities to deal with stressful experiences.

Last but not least, the data suggests that it may be necessary to empower and support victims in different ways, depending on whether they were targeted by known or unknown persons, or which of their profiles was targeted. At the very least, the findings suggest that the two variants are perceived and interpreted differently, which is why it could be helpful if this is taken into account more seriously in prevention and intervention. Thus, there is a need for further research into this issue and the benefits of specific approaches.

6. Conclusion

It is not only the responsibility of the family, but also of professional practice, such as criminal justice, to protect young people from danger and violence in different settings, including online spaces, and to support them in dealing with negative experiences. The increased use of anonymous and multiple online profiles among young people does not alleviate this, but leads to new challenges for all involved. It is important for criminological research, criminal justice and the education of parents to meet these demands. At the same time, the balancing act and trust of adults in young people, especially parents, to find their own ways of interacting in and exploring online spaces in a self-determined way is necessary. Social and digital media increasingly characterise our communication, which is why several competences of young people need to be created and strengthened. Great media competence in this sense, for instance, means not only technical know-how, but also skills in interpersonal interaction.

Notes

1. Among other things, this might result from building up a certain notoriety as well as social contacts and relationships or acquiring roles and functions in certain chats, online games, etc. that they regularly frequent with anonymous profiles, which are identity-forming (Mishna et al., 2009).

2. The significant overhang was because this was mainly a study on juvenile delinquency, in which young males have significantly higher prevalences and were therefore more strongly considered in the sample.

3. These mainly included the socio-demographics and the annual prevalence of delinquency.

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