

Youth perspectives on cyberbullying in Latvia

Research report
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Introduction

On prevalence of cyberbullying

Since the advent of the World Wide Web in the 90ties, society has undergone tremendous changes in relation to the way how information is used and shared among different groups and individuals. Unfortunately, this form of communication has also been recognised as fertile ground for abuse and harassment. Comparative findings from EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile research shows that the chance that children in Europe will be exposed to cyberbullying increased from 7% to 12% from 2010 to 2014. Sorrentino et al. (2019) research on cyberbullying across 8 European countries (Italy, France, Poland, Spain, Hungary, Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria) showed that approximately 1 in 4 adolescents reported being a victim of cyberbullying in the previous six months. The research carried out in Latvia also paints a rather alarming picture – while researching the digital skills of Latvian students Rubene (2017) discovered that 45% of them have been hurt or offended on the social networks.

Defining cyberbullying

As the research in the field is still developing, there is yet no single definition of bullying and cyberbullying agreed upon internationally or at the European level. As noted by Notar et. al. (2013), the term cyberbullying did not exist until 2003, which is long after the rise and fall of the first chat rooms, which established many of the abusive patterns and behaviours we are still seeing today. In 2016 UN report cyberbullying is defined as

“An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (UN Secretary General 2016)

Furthermore, since then UN has emphasised the importance of recognising cyberbullying as a form of online violence, which correlates with our approach where we wished to direct our attention towards the violent aspects of cyberbullying. We believe that this aspect of cyberbullying is crucial both from analytical and practical perspectives. From a practical perspective it is important, as research shows (Broll&Huey 2013) that relevant actors might not recognise the significance of cyberbullying which can lead to lack of support and lack of investment in its prevention. From analytical perspective we argue that by including

violence in the analytical frame the distinction between cyberbullying and other forms of internet-based communication becomes clearer. Therefore, in our work we defined cyberbullying as:

“Repeated communication between individuals or groups of individuals in cyberspace that results or can result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.”

On links to other violence

While the definition of the phenomena is still an ongoing process, research has shown that there is a marked negative impact that arises from cyberbullying and associated practices. Jung et. al. (2014) carried out the research about the connections between cyberbullying and various psychopathological symptoms among Korean youth, which showed that there exists a link between cyberbullying and problematic internet use and depression. Gamez et al. (2013) found similar patterns in Spain. It is important to note that both research teams emphasised that the problematic is connected to both the victims and perpetrators which underlines the importance of realising that cyberbullying as a phenomenon should not be viewed through the prism of perpetrator-victim relationship, but rather as representation of a dysfunctional relationship which is harmful for all involved parties.

In our research we build on the notion of Li (2007) who argues that **cyberbullying should be seen as related to bullying in the physical setting rather than perceived to be a separate phenomenon**. This is also supported by research that has been carried out locally, where Kvante et al (2016) showed that the schoolchildren who are victims or victims / perpetrators of bullying in a school environment are more likely to suffer from cyberbullying regardless of their sex, age and family income.

Our research

We used peer ethnography approach to interview students about their cyberbullying experiences with the aim to understand how cyberbullying is understood, experienced and performed by them. Research was carried out during the spring semester of 2019. Interviewing was carried out by 6 university students and one of the 3 lecturers supervising the project. Furthermore, 4 peer researchers from among the schoolchildren also participated in the research. We carried out 15 interviews with children aged 13-18 years old. Interviews were then coded and analysed.

We start the report with explicating the different forms of what students describe as hating, negativity or bullying online. In these we include both, forms that they see as problematic and forms that they describe as *just kidding* with potentially harmful consequences. We argue that for them cyberbullying is a part of a broader dimension of social relationships that extends beyond the virtual. Moving to explore this connection the third chapter explores how students use social media and how they navigate between forging relationships, searching for social approval and risk being ridiculed, shamed or perceived as inauthentic online. We describe how students manage their online presence and use different strategies of anonymity and privacy in various social media. The fourth chapter describes how students deal with cyberbullying and in which ways it is normalized and not acted upon. It also explores how perspectives on preventing cyberbullying often include individualization and victim-blaming.

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Chapter 1: Methodology

To avoid preconceptions about a field that is noted to be filled with prejudice (Laizāne, Putniņa, Mileiko, 2015), we chose to use ethnographic fieldwork as our methodological direction. The research was conducted as a part of semester-long study course, therefore setting a time-limitation for involvement in the field. In order to maximise our chances of gathering qualitative data, we chose to use peer-ethnography.

Peer-ethnography is designed for working together with vulnerable groups and/or on controversial topics. Our inspiration to use this method came from Māra Laizāne (2015), but it was originally developed by Price and Hawkins (2002). The key methodological aspect of peer-ethnography is that some members of the group under investigation are trained not only to be sources of information but also to participate as interviewers. They are taught the basic skills of conducting interviews and as peer-ethnographers they subsequently choose peers which they interview. The focus of peer-ethnography is to gather data through sharing of stories and examples. Participants are encouraged to talk freely about their opinions and experiences (Crawley, Hemmings & Price, 2011).

To distinguish between us and our participants as researchers we will in the following text refer to us as the ‘core research team’ and the participant-interviewers as ‘peer-ethnographers’. The distinction is made as the participant-interviewers were not involved in the writing process. Meanwhile, in the context of this report we use “students”, when talking about all of the interviewed research participants.

To gain access to the field, we divided ourselves into three teams consisting of two students each. One of the lecturers also took part in the fieldwork. Each team contacted one school in Riga or neighbouring regions and interviewed two participants who then became the peer-ethnographers. After we had taught them the basic interviewing skills, they each interviewed up to 2 schoolmates using questions we had previously formulated. All participants were school students aged 13 - 18, most of them female. All interviews were recorded and sent to the teams. In total 15 interviews were conducted, most in Latvian, few in English and few in Russian. The average length of interviews was 30 minutes. Each team transcribed their interviews and the ones conducted by their peer-ethnographers. Data analysis was performed in form of discussions within the core research team and by using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data encoding program. Coding of interview transcripts enabled a more comprehensive analysis of data, using code categories and identifying the spread of opinions. Data was analysed based on

the code groups that were formulated based on the research questions and data acquired from the desk research. The initially defined code groups were “use of internet”, “perceptions”, “cyberbullying”, “dealing with bullying”, “tools for bullying”, “relationships”.

1.1. Ethics

In order to maintain ethical standards we maintain the anonymity of research participants throughout the research. Neither the names of participants, nor any personal details that might lead to them being recognised are included. Furthermore, in order to maintain the anonymity of research participants we have chosen not to disclose exact numbers of interviews that were done in English and Russian. Furthermore, as the number of Russian speaking participants was very low, we are not including quotations in Russian language for the same reason. Considering the small scale of the research, full anonymity is almost impossible to maintain which makes the task that much more important. To ensure that ethical standards are upheld, we informed the participants of the risks and gave advice on how to minimise them. Finally, we also maintained a cautious attitude within the core research group. Each team therefore only actually knows the two peer-ethnographers they interviewed. The peer-ethnography method results in the core research team never directly meeting and usually not having contact details about the interviewed peers, increasing the level of anonymity (Crawley, Hemmings, & Price, 2011).

1.2. Challenges

Accessing the field proved to be challenging. Considering that our research participants were school children, we needed consent of the school, parents and participants themselves. Consequently, if at any stage of the research any of the involved parties stopped responding or wished to stop participating they were free to withdraw from the research. The complexity of the field meant that gatekeepers like known teachers or relatives who work at schools played an important role in the research, with most of us gaining access to the field this way. The reliance on gatekeepers meant that we had no direct control over the way how research participants were selected. This means that we must accept a certain bias towards including more active students and girls. The strong representation of one gender may influence obtained data and should be kept in mind when reading this report.

Furthermore, keeping in touch with research participants also turned out to be more challenging than expected. Due to the nature of peer research, especially one involving adolescents, the

response rate and investment in the project from the participants varied greatly. This affected both the data quality (not all of the planned interviews were conducted, missing consent forms which resulted in unusable data etc.) and planned activities as we were not able to conduct a focus group after the end of fieldwork as we had originally planned.

Working in a group of 8 people with differing skill and experience levels in regards to qualitative research, was a valuable experience for everyone involved, but presented further challenges – the biggest one being reaching a common understanding of tasks. Furthermore, when using concepts, formulating questions and coding transcripts, it was a challenge to ensure that all of us know precisely how concepts and codes are supposed to be understood and used.

Finally, we would like to reflect on the issues related to language use during the research. Two members of our core research team are not fluent in Latvian which meant the whole planning procedure of this project and this final report has to be in English. However, native Latvian - as well as native Russian - speaking students took part in research. Therefore, most interviews are in Latvian, some in English and some in Russian. This increases the risk of misinterpretation as the correct meaning of a phrase may be lost when translating. Consequently all quotes included in this report will be presented both in Latvian and English.

Chapter 2: Student understanding of cyberbullying

With this section we move to discuss the data we have acquired in the research. This chapter is dedicated to discussing the ways how cyberbullying is perceived by our research participants and what they see are the main reasons of bullying. This chapter consists of six sub-chapters where we analyse and explicate the specifics as well as the limitations of student understandings' of cyberbullying:

- 1) A general understanding of bullying;
- 2) Naming cyberbullying;
- 3) Forms of cyberbullying;
- 4) Reasons for being a victim;
- 5) Reasons for being a bully;
- 6) The screen as a shield.

2.1. A general understanding of bullying

With social media platforms gaining in popularity it has become increasingly easy to make conversations public and share pictures of self and others. In the interviews, students' conversation focus oscillates freely from bullying to cyberbullying, thus, finding it problematic to establish when is bullying primarily cyber. Further, since it is not always possible to trace who has made the account or who is commenting on your profile, it becomes a challenge to discern whom to trust and how to react to such situations. This uncertainty is furthered by students not being sure their understanding of cyberbullying fits with that of the institutional narrative, which students thought we as interviewers in an official research project on the subject represent. Especially at first students were cautious in their answers. Nuances like a sarcastic laugh or hesitation in the answer hinted to things left unsaid, as illustrated in the following fragment:

- *I noticed how you said several times: “Well, they're bullied a little” and such. How do you know when one is bullied a little and when a lot?*
- *One is bullied a lot when they don't want to live anymore. Like, when they just cry about it in the evenings and at night.*
- *How do you know that they don't cry?*
- *Well, people are sad a school. How they react to it... Well, “a little”, maybe that was a little sarcastic, maybe some are bullied a lot. [...] Well, yes, there was an account where some put some pictures, a funny video with the same person. And there are these now too.*
- *From the school?*
- *Yes, from the school. But again, it was just a private account, and it was shown just to, you know, some. So it hasn't been that bad that cyberbullying is in school. Maybe only some people. But I don't know such cases, I myself don't take part in it. I guess...*
Jana
- *Es ievēroju, ka Tu vairākas reizes teici: “Nu, nedaudz viņus apceļ” un tā. Kā Tu nosaki, kad apceļ nedaudz, un kad riktīgi apceļ?*
- *Riktīgi apceļ tad kad jau dzīvot negribās. Tad kad jau vienkārši raud vakaros un naktīs par to.*
- *Kā Tu zini, ka viņi neraud?*
- *Nu, cilvēki ir bēdīgi varbūt skolā. Tas, kā viņi reaģē uz to... Nu kā, “nedaudz”, varbūt tas bija nedaudz sarkastiski, varbūt dažus apceļ arī daudz. [...] Nu jā, bija tāds akonts, kur lika kaut kādas bildes, kaut kādus smieklīgus video ar vienu un to pašu cilvēku. Un arī tagad tādi ir.*
- *No skolas?*
- *Jā, no skolas. Bet tas atkal bija tikai privāts akonts, un to rādīja tikai, nu, dažiem. Tā kā, mums nav bijis tik traki, ka kiberbuljošana... [smejas] ir skolā. Varbūt tikai dažiem cilvēkiem. Bet es nezīnu tādus gadījumus, es pati nepiedalos tajā. Laikam...*
Jana

The ambiguity of the added ‘I guess’ at the end of this excerpt illustrates how uncertain the students themselves are about whether particular practices can be classified as bullying or not. At the same time, they distinguish between what they see as more harmful and not that serious in regards of effect on the person’s wellbeing. There seems to be a prevailing notion that if someone is repeatedly addressed with negative comments in-class or online, it constitutes bullying. However, the notion of mean communication is not problematic per se and the line of acceptability varies depending on the context.

In another example, Anna admits that in her class of less than ten people, one boy is being bullied by the rest due to “being different”. She talks about this as if that is just the order of things. A rhetoric of “just be yourself and chill out” clashes with questionable treatment of fellow students. The maltreatment is recognized, but also normalized. Students believe it is possible to notice bullying but the effects of it are harder to understand:

If you are that person that sees that something is happening, then you have to ask that person, like, how do they feel about it. And you have to try and offer help. If that person pushes you off and they say that they need none of your help, and if they are really, like, aggressive at that point, that means that they are really fucked up, can I say that? Basically, they are in a horrible situation.

Rebeka

Ja tu esi tas cilvēks, kas redz, ka kaut kas notiek, tad ir jāpajautā tam cilvēkam, nu kā viņš par to jūtās. Un jāmēģina piedāvāt savu palīdzību. Ja tas cilvēks tevi reāli atšuj, un, ja viņš saka, ka viņam reāli nekādu tavu palīdzību nevajag, un ja viņš kaut kāds agresīvs ir tajā momentā, tas nozīmē, ka viņš ir reāli dirsā, es varu tā teikt. Nu karoč viņš ir reāli briesmīgā situācijā.

Rebeka

This interview excerpt also shows that it is possible to discuss consequences of cyberbullying in daily communication and students are at least somewhat aware of the effect it is having on relationships. However, later on in the interviews students find it difficult to describe what effect would a particular practice of cyberbullying have. All of the effects are described vaguely as being negative, in some cases harmful. At times, it seemed students lack words to formulate what they think is going on.

2.2. Naming cyberbullying

Students use of language not only shows how they view and experience, but also recognize bullying and harmful forms of communication. Furthermore, it allows to observe distinctive online linguistic practices among students (Squires, 2010). An interesting aspect is to look at students use and views on the term "cyberbullying" itself. The Latvian version – *kibernīrgāšanās* -, often seen as a direct transfer from English, has not been widely known to many students. As Kārlis formulated it:

“I hear the name for the first time, but I understand its meaning”.

Kārlis

“Es pirmo reizi dzirdu to vārdu, bet es saprotu tā nozīmi”

Kārlis

Furthermore, opinions about the use of this term and the fact how it sounds are not always positive. Instead of this phrase, words like *mobing (mobings)*, *hating (heitings/heits)*, *bullying (buljošana)*, *judging (džadžošana)* are used, which might indicate that students may not see the need to add an explanation that violence is taking place online. Even though linguistic features may indicate social properties such as a student’s gender, age, region, school (Squires, 2010), the use of terms in these interviews did not appear to be the main indicator of

these qualities. Still some views on this concept can be divided into two parts, given that the first part of the word “*cyber (kiber)*” seemed familiar and logical, as Rebeka asserted:

“Cyberbullying no, but cyber – the first part – I have heard!”.

Rebeka

“Kiberņirgāšanās nē, bet kiber - to pirmo daļu -, gan esmu dzirdējusi.

Rebeka

In contrast, the second part “*bullying (ņirgāšanās)*” is occasionally seen to be unsuitable and even ridiculous, therefore replaceable. Continuing Rebeka's opinion:

“I think one could definitely find a better word. Because bullying is just; it only associates with: 'Ohh, it was just a joke!' Well, with something minor! There should definitely be a more serious word there”.

Rebeka

“Es domāju, ka noteikti varētu atrast labāku vārdu. Jo ņirgāšanās ir tikai tāds; tas asociējas tikai ar tādu: ‘Aij, kaut kāds jociņš!’ ‘Nu, mazsvarīgi! Tur noteikti būtu jāieliek kāds nopietnāks vārds’.

Rebeka

When asked about the Latvian version, Laura even said that this term sounds funny, even hilarious, which is further linked to the notion that all direct English transfers to Latvian are similar cases as “*kiberņirgāšanās*” (cyberbullying). *Per contra*, some interviewees acknowledged the propriety of this word given that it is a composite. The idea behind the concept is therefore perceived as it explains the bullying that takes place in cyberspace, like Kristīne shared her thoughts that this term is applicable, regarding the place and the form of violence. Enija had similar thoughts:

"Actually it could be. Because it is a mockery. And it is also related to the *cyber* and all those things. It may seem unfit at first glance, but if one thinks, it might be good".

Enija

“Īstenībā varētu būt. Jo tā ir ņirgāšanās. Un tas ir arī saistīts ar kiber un tām visām lietām. Viņš varbūt pirmajā mirklī liekas tāds varbūt nepārāk, bet, ja tā padomā, viņš varētu būt labs”

Enija

There is also a notion that this term is not even really necessary in Latvian vocabulary, because, for instance, the USA is seen as a place where this term would be more relevant. So, for example, Laura's opinion also showed the overall perspective on this issue. Considering that, to her mind, this is a more common problem in the USA, as there are more internet and social platform users, which results in much more pressure and complex setting. Such a

situation also leads to real consequences, including the behavior of the person for example, by depriving oneself of life. As a result, it can be said that the use of terms is largely offset by the range and distribution of the problem itself. Maija, too, had a similar view - she does not think that the cyberbullying is a topical problem in Latvia, therefore may be a doubt about the need for such a term. However, it is crucial to point that these multiple interpretations do not suggest a compelling barrier to communication. It seems that no matter what word one uses, others will mostly understand the meaning of this word. There does not seem to be an idea for a substitute word that would be accepted by more than one or two students.

As for other terms that could characterize pupils' knowledge in the formulations, mostly, English-language conversational words are used. This is well observed in the way students describe people who are actively using and working on social networks. So, for example, both Latvian and Russian speakers used words such as *Youtuber(i)*; *Instagramer(i)* etc., thus transferring the generic word to the user of these cases. A similar situation is with verbs related to online activities. These words have automatic connotations with some of the Internet-enabled fields, for instance, *blocking*, by interview data, is related to the question of privacy and security; *hating* is viewed not only as emotionally saturated word (not as much as it is negative) but also as a substitute to *cyberbullying*.

It can be concluded that the terminology is greatly influenced by both the most widely used languages on the internet, such as, English and Russian, and students' own views on the necessity and applicability of these terms. In uncommon but existing conditions, school-based lectures can complement student vocabulary, as it is with the Latvian word for *cyberbullying*. As a result, there is a certain word inference, where:

- 1) Students could not identify the term;
- 2) Students recognized and understood the term, but they did not apply it themselves
- 3) Students understand the term via using it practically in speaking and writing.

By any means, there is no one approach of how these terms have been applied. Terminology is fragmented and yet recognizable for the majority, which suggests that in schools the participatory approach is needed, which involves students' own requirements for a specific terms.

2.3. Forms of cyberbullying

While students do not feel confident in labeling their experience as cyberbullying they mention a lot of aspects of posting pictures and comments that are recognized as being hateful, harmful or mean. Students do not generally distinguish between different forms of cyberbullying, but for the sake of clarity we propose viewing it as:

- 1) Mean commenting;
- 2) Sharing of private data and information;
- 3) Negativity in closed circles/outing/exclusion.

2.3.1. Mean commenting

Research participants did not describe their own commenting practices in depth. However, when asked about the likelihood and forms of cyberbullying they most often mentioned mean comments as the primary issue. The understanding was that mean comments are those that include hateful judgement addressed to a person who is in the post or is its author. Although the general perception was that mean comments can be found everywhere, the platforms mostly associated with mean commenting were Instagram, Youtube and Facebook, yet this seems to largely correlate with how often students tell they use a particular platform. For example, there was no agreement among students which platform had most of mean comments. For one student, it was the comments section of Youtube. For another, the most problematic platform was Instagram, as hateful statements are often not removed there, and for her it seemed it mostly being girls being mean in their comments on other girls' posts. At the same time, the vast majority of our research participants were girls who mention primarily using Instagram, signaling of the platform and gender of users research participants interact with the most. In the case of Instagram, mean comments are said to mostly include harsh remarks about the appearance of the author of the post.

Students recognise mean commenting is not encouraged, but by recognising this they affirm their agency in doing mean commenting - it is disapproved of in the interviews but also commented on as a practice that you "can do" to further your interests in the social realm:

"You don't have to say bad comments and disclose your negative opinion just because you can - ... if you don't

"Tev nav jāsapaka slikti komentāri un jāizpauž savs negatīvais viedoklis tikai tāpēc, ka tu to vari - ... ja

have something positive to say to that person on the internet, then don't pay attention to him.”

Estere

tev nav kaut kas pozitīvs, ko pateikt internetā tam cilvēkam, nu tad nevajag pievērst viņam uzmanību.”

Estere

On platforms where negative commenting can be upvoted, the judgement that is meant to the person can be a part of broader moral policing of posts that are seen as too sexual, too honest, not aesthetically pleasing or in any other way inappropriate in the view of the commenter. This way the commenter is also seeking for social approval and is a part of judging of what kind of posts are promoted on the platform.

As will be examined in the chapter on virtual vs physical space, cyberspace is a zone in which students see people as able to express themselves with less restrictions. For them, it is in many ways a more accessible public. Being able to formulate the sentence nicely beforehand, not having to face the addressed person directly and being in a comfortable setting increases this openness. Being aware that negative commentary might invite backlash, being able to do it carefully and from a distance seems to be a strategic decision.

Another important factor is anonymity. The ability to comment without anyone knowing who you are, immensely increases the likelihood to express one's honest thoughts but also to act harmfully as one does not have to fear consequences. Although students express it is favourable to be honest, honesty is only acceptable if it is done in a positive manner. Students express not liking stepping upon mean and hostile content and comments, yet no clear line is drawn between honest critique and hurtful criticism. An example by Agate is:

“On the Internet, I don't always understand what's happening. For example, there are two best friends in school and then one puts such a very motivating, cool text and something. And then his friend who just writes hate, and what is this shit, how can one put this on the internet. And it is so not clear, because they are friends, but come on.”

Agate

“Internetā man ļoti nepieļec, kas notiek vienmēr. Jo, piemēram, skolā ir divi labākie draugi un tad viens ieliek tādu ļoti motivējošu, foršu tekstu un bildi, un ko tur. Un tad viņa draugs, kas vienkārši uzraksta baigo heitu, un kas tas par sūdu, kā tādu var likt internetā. Un tik ļoti nepieļec, jo viņi, tākā, ir draugi, bet come on.”

Agate

There is less ambiguity if the author of a negative comment is anonymous. In these cases the common perception is that the intent was antagonistic, as the critique in these comments is mostly not constructive and the possibility of this being an inside joke is lessened

by the anonymity of the writer. As explored next, often behaviour that is harmful is interpreted as funny by some of the involved and “bystanders” alike .

2.3.2. *Just kidding!* by sharing private information

The line that distinguishes ‘just joking around’ and ‘actual bullying’ is rather unclear. Even if certain actions might seem as bullying, in many of those cases that were shared by the students, some students thought of them as a joke. One such example as told by Agate:

“[...] we have this one instagram girl which is popular (in class), who puts others’ pictures, also if they don’t want that, for example, such humiliating (pictures), but as a joke. And she puts it in a way, like, “oh, lovely, i love you anyways, don’t worry”. And they are, like, “oh, well”, and everyone is running after her, but it doesn’t look nice to me, that she does that. [...] She has one private profile where she posts humiliating pictures with others. But, like, they don’t get offended, because she says, “oh, I will love you if you don’t get offended and everything is chill”.

Agate

“[...] mums ir populāra tā viena instagrama meitene (klasē), kura liek citu bildes, kad arī viņi to negrib, pieņemsim, tādas apkaunojošas, bet, tākā, pa jokam. Un viņa tākā, nu, pasniedz to, vai jauki, es tāpat tevi mīlu, neuztraucies. Un viņiem tāds, nu, jā, un visi, tākā, skrien viņai pakaļ, bet no malas neizskatās, ka tas būtu jauki, ka viņa tā dara.[...]Viņai viens tāds privātais profils, kur viņa liek apkaunojošās bildes ar citiem. Bet, tākā, viņi neapvainojās, jo viņa pasaka, ai, es jūs tāpat mīlu, ja jūs neapvainojaties un viss chill”.

Agate

Even though Agate and some of her classmates might not be very fond of the girl posting pictures of them, the situation is presented as a joke and that it is nothing worth worrying about. It seems that because this girl has gained certain popularity in the group, other students are not resisting her and just go along with it. There seems to be a power imbalance in the class, leading some of the students to accept and incorporate the dominant persons or groups behavioral patterns so to ensure one's desired status in the group. Something that shows up throughout the interviews is that if the seeming majority finds it funny, instances of bullying are not perceived as being serious. When asked about bullying in class and if there is something they can do about it, Rebeka explained:

“I don’t know if we can, because the majority of the class supports it. And, you know - while you can laugh about it, it is all good”.

Rebeka

Es nezinu, vai var, jo lielākā klases daļa ir par to. Un zini kā - kamēr par to var smieties, tad viss kārtībā.

Rebeka

This shows that there is peer pressure in the ways how different situations are perceived and how/if they are acted upon. Furthermore, several students mentioned that they would act upon a situation if they would see that it is not a joke anymore and the person in question actually suffers. However, it is not always completely clear if and how much does a person suffer, as it largely depends on one's own ways of expressing emotions as well as the overall dynamics of the class. A major factor of whether something is perceived as funny is how close the victim's relationship is with the other person and what is the audience - how publicly available the interaction is. Some of the participants note that as long as certain information stays within the group or among particular people it can be seen as a joke. In the case of Jana, pictures of herself that she found embarrassing were sent to some other people. However, as she explained:

“It is funny maybe if close friends have those pictures... When they go to some other people who I even don't know, it is not nice, and then something should be done about it”.

Jana

Smieklīgi ir tad, varbūt kad tās bildes ir tuviem draugiem... Kad tās aiziet pie kaut kādiem citiem cilvēkiem, kurus es pat nepazīstu, tas gan nav jauki, un tad jau kaut kas varbūt jāsāk darīt.

Jana

Another example would be a negative comment that is made by a close friend and in a less public setting e.g. on Snapchat. The situation in this example was commented on as possibly being benign and permissible. This, however, does not mean the person receiving the negative comment is not hurt. Such semi-public circles of information exchange also provide an opportunity for the last type of cyberbullying we identified in our research.

2.3.3. Outing

Often when commenting on how their class gets along students mention that while everything is great overall there are a couple of people who are at times harassed or left out of activities. Something similar can be observed on cyberspace. In interviews students shared experiences of a practice which we include in what is defined as outing in which, for example, possibly embarrassing photos of the victim are uploaded onto a profile which is made private (inaccessible) to the general visitors of the particular social network. The term outing designates sharing of private messages without the consent of the involved person, this was not something that is often mentioned.

In case of private Instagram accounts, usually the victim is unaware of this at first, as the photos are only visible to those who have been authorised by the person who uploads them. Often the victim might also be unaware such photos exist at all. In case the victim requests access to this content, access is simply denied. Although this might sound similar to creating fake profiles of the victim, a crucial difference here is the general public is not misled to think this profile is owned by the victim. Instead this profile might as well be a private group or a chat, in which inside jokes about the victim are made either by repeatedly posting content of something humiliating that happened in real life or starting a joke that can be in turn continued in real life.

The way how outing is conducted suggests some internet literacy on part of those who make fun of the victim. As the profile is not public, it will probably not attract much attention thus lessening the chance of getting in trouble for making fun of someone in an organised way, possibly for a prolonged period of time. A curious example is mentioned by one of the students - a group of classmates decided to get back at a bully by creating a private account in which “funny” pictures and videos of this person were posted. The student who told this story did not consider it to be cyberbullying because the account was only shown to the persons involved. This was often the case that students did not consider certain practices as bullying. Some of it relates to the way they see the internet and practices of just kidding. However, some of it is also related to how students see the victim and the bully, the boundaries of which make their understanding of bullying.

2.4. Reasons for being a victim

None of the interviewed students believe that people who fall victim to cyberbullying deserve to be harmed. That being said, students not only comment on what could likely lead to becoming a victim, but also legitimise these criteria by trying to adhere to the rules of conduct not to get bullied themselves. From the interviews we conducted it is clear that students believe there is an unwritten code of conduct for at least lessening one's chances of getting bullied. Lack of skills or interest in adhering to it can lead to one being bullied and ostracized. This line of thought is one of the ways students contribute to the practices of victim-blaming, commenting victims' circumstances as “Of course, you will get bullied if you _____”.

When talking about reasons for becoming a victim, student views can be divided in two major categories - actions and characteristics of or related to the victim. While characteristics include examples such as being poor and not being good looking by peers' standards, activities include “being too brave” and posting too individualistic and self-expressive content. In many

of the mentioned examples, these categories are overlapping, and it seems the best way not to get bullied would be to generally not stand out, be normative online. Although students generally did not believe cyberbullying is gender specific, interviews show that there exists a difference in how boys and girls experience and carry out bullying. Girls experience greater scrutiny about the way they present their bodies and sexual behaviour online. For example, while for the girl participants sending or posting of naked or semi-naked photos were often mentioned this did not show up in boys interviews. While our insight into gender related aspects is affected by the lack of boys participating in our research, according to the interviews, both boys and girls do bullying. This brings us to the question of how students see the bully.

2.5. Reasons for being a bully

Although the students did not share a common understanding of what makes a bully, students' explanations for why their peers choose to bully others were consistent in that all students: 1) had a distinguished idea of there being a set of characteristics or circumstances that "make a bully"; 2) recognised the self interest of a bully that is realised through bullying in a way that does not de-humanise the bully:

I think people who bully other people are insecure themselves, they don't know how to deal with that, maybe they have something rough going on in their own lives and that is the only way that they know how to get their emotions out, and they feel better by making other people feel worse.
Kristīne

*Es domāju, cilvēki, kuri apceļ citus cilvēkus paši ir nedroši, viņi nezin, kā ar to tikt galā, varbūt viņiem pašiem ir kādi sarežģījumi dzīvē un tas ir vienīgais veids, kā izteikt emocijas, un viņi jūtas labāk, liekot citiem cilvēkiem justies sliktāk.
Kristīne*

The most common explanation for what defines a bully was "being unhappy with one's life". This includes being jealous, insecure, being abused previously and/or at domestic environment, being competitive and looking for attention, as well as plain boredom. Another set of reasons commented on as being related to external factors were that the bully is not in control. In this case, what was blamed was lack of upbringing, a general lack of maturity or the way Latvian school system works. The school system was the only reason given by the students that was not psychological, but rather social and structural. At the same, it was not described in a detailed manner which settings facilitate students' abusive behaviour.

Although students generally recognise the bully is the one causing harm to others, none of them say that a bully should be harmed, or that they are a lost cause.

“I believe one shouldn’t fear other people. At the end of the day, we are all people, all the same. We all fail and do things that maybe shouldn’t be done,”
Estere

Es nedomāju, ka cilvēkiem vajadzētu baidīties vienam no otra. Dienas beigās mēs visi esam cilvēki, visi vienādi. Mēs visi kļūdāmies un darām lietas, ko iespējams nevajadzētu.
Estere

Almost all students say they try to empathize with the bully figure, but it is much less frequent that students report actually approaching a bully to try and get to the root of the problem and minimise the harm the bully is doing to others. Thus, the rhetorical position which allows students to maintain moral superiority in face of bullying and the bully also allows removing oneself from the situation not only in terms of solving the situation, but, what is more important here - in participating in the process of enabling it. As many of the situations are perceived by the students as not having a clear bully or a victim, students often do not see themselves participating in bullying, if they, for example, are in a private group that makes fun of somebody. The idea that the bully must be someone who has psychological issues or who is explicit about his dislike towards someone disallows students to recognize themselves in relatively less prescribed potential bullying situations.

The unclear boundaries between bully and what is called *hater* as well as between cyberbullying and *just kidding* also make it harder to identify what constitutes cyberbullying. Therefore, understanding of the issue as merely a psychological problem overlooks how it is a social and structural issue related to normalized violent relationships. Key to discerning what shapes cyberbullying apart from students’ relationships in class is how they understand the online environment.

2.6. The screen as a shield

Online you can say something rude to someone. And maybe in real life when you are face to face with someone you can't do that because you don't feel exactly the same.

Emīlija

Onlainā tu vari pateikt kaut ko rupju kādam. Un varbūt reālajā dzīvē kad tu fiziski esi ar to cilvēku tu to nevari izdarīt, jo tu nejuties tieši tāpat.

Emīlija

According to the students, in the online environment one feels more confident, more outgoing, and more safe to express their opinions, including unwelcome ones. Laima uses the analogy of “using the screen as a shield, so that you are saying a bad thing, but at the same time you're not really saying it because you are behind a screen”. Almost univocally, the students distinguish between the online environment and face-to-face interactions, where the latter is the only respectable form of saying mean things. Throughout most of the interviews students say any disagreements and uncomfortable matters (also telling someone they are fat, for example) have to be settled in person.

Anonymity means that the person is afraid to reveal themselves, that they don't have the courage to say it in the face, because it is much better that you come up to that person and say it in their face that you are fat or ugly instead of just hiding behind something [...] that means that you are worse than that person, if you cannot say it in their face, you cannot be brave.

Maija

Anonimitāte nozīmē to, ka tam cilvēkam ir vienkārši bail sevi atmaskot, ka viņam nav drosmes to pateikt sejā, jo ir daudz labāk, kad pieej klāt tam cilvēkam un pasaki sejā, ka tu esi resns vai neglīts, nekā, kad tu vienkārši slēpies aiz kaut kā. [...] tas nozīmē, ka tu esi sliktāks par to cilvēku, jo tu nevari to pateikt sejā, tu nevari būt drosmīgs.

Maija

Hence, using the cover of the internet to bully is seen as being rather cowardly. Paradoxically, that is generally a disrespected trait in people and one that hardly anybody would like to be associated with. However, if one bullies anonymously, nobody can condemn them face-to-face, in a form of interaction that evidently holds more weight than communicating through social platforms. As, for example, the comments mentioned are usually about appearance that is seen as outside of the social norm or someone posting content that it is thought to deserve negative criticism or ridicule, the comments themselves are not recognized as that problematic. It is also a common advice that one shouldn't take comments like this

seriously, thus, contributing to the view that it is not really bullying, or a rather soft version of it.

On the internet, if you do not like somebody, you can just block them. In *real life*, it is quite different when somebody cuts you off or is mean, remarks Rebeka. She argues that the nature of the internet is that, as soon as there is a big number of people, a portion of the comments will inevitably be negative. We suggest that a certain desensitization to mean content characterizes adept users of the internet. A sentiment along the lines of “Oh, come on, it’s *the internet!*” was expressed by a number of research participants. It is thought that with this kind of attitude people have an easier time when faced with some strains of cyberbullying. The problematic aspect is that the boundaries of this desentization are different and can also vary from platform to platform.

Then again, it is common for people with social anxiety to favour the internet. It is a way to connect, which might be more challenging in the physical world for some. On the internet, they are able to show a side of themselves that they do not in the physical world. Conversely, social media is used as an outlet to paint one’s life as more glamorous and happier than it might actually be. As Maija puts it:

I believe that [...] what we see on the internet is not what that person is like ordinarily. For example, you can post a picture where you are smiling and everything is alright, but on the inside you don't feel happy, inside of you everything is falling apart, we are showing what we want others to see. We don't really show that which we don't want to show.
Maija

Es uzskatu, ka [...] tas ko mēs redzam internetā, tas nav, tas kāds tas cilvēks ir ikdienā. Piemēram, tu vari izlikt bildi, kur tu smaidi un tev viss ir kārtībā, bet iekšā tu nejūties laimīgs, tev viss iekšā jūk un brūk, mēs jau rādām, to, ko mēs gribam, lai citi redz. Mēs jau nerādām, to ko mēs negribam, lai redz. Tas ir tāpat kā cilvēki YouTube, cilvēki tur ir tādi, kādi citi cilvēki grib viņus redzēt.

Maija

The word students use to describe the world beyond social media is *real world*. Additionally, Jana, for example, says that she does not use the internet as much as some of her classmates, because she also has her *own life*. This view can be limiting when it comes to noticing cyberbullying as certain practices can be said to be less related to the *real world* or one’s *own life*. This does not mean that the effects of cyberbullying are less *real*. Rather, it gives us a hint to ways how it can be downplayed or overlooked.

In short, the online environment provides ways how to manage the image of self with the tools of social media and means to express opinions inappropriate in other contexts. This

is recognized by students as different from what they call *real life* which is more restrictive and calls for more “bravery” to bully. If students describe online communication and mean comments as being less serious than if said face-to-face, this raises a question on what is then the proper way how to address cyberbullying. Clearly not every negative comment constitutes it and the same words might as well have different effect if posted as an anonymous comment in comparison to face-to-face discussion. If the students distinguish between the internet and *real life*, it doesn’t mean that they live “separate lives”, but that there are rules, affordances as well as risks involved in social media use which need to be discussed in relation to cyberbullying.

Chapter 3: Being social on media

Students' understanding of cyberbullying is closely related to the way they use the platforms in which cyberbullying and other mean uses of the media is conducted. As the platforms offer settings of privacy, forms of creating anonymous and *fake* accounts, tools to easily share otherwise private information as well as mediated ways to express approval or disapproval of posted content, in this chapter we describe how students navigate them.

3.1. Online habits

Before examining the significance the internet has for students, we will briefly outline the most frequent online habits reported by our participants. Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook are the most commonly used, though Estere remarked that “Facebook, I believe, is very old-fashioned for our generation”. No other participant described it like that but not all participants actively engage with that platform; Instagram and Snapchat are favoured more. Other applications which were mentioned but do not have a major importance are Youtube, Twitter, Pinterest, and email-service providers. For the participants active in the Russian internet, among the major platforms is also VKontakte. A clear distinction between the uses of these platforms is observable:

Facebook is like the official thing. There's only some travelling photos, my family photos, and Snapchat is more of my parties or Instagram is for my parties. Anna	<i>Feisbuku ir tā kā oficiālā lieta. Tur ir tikai bildes no ceļojumiem, manas ģimenes bildes, un snapchatā ir vairāk no manām ballītēm vai instagrams ir ballītēm.</i> Anna
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Instagram is mainly used to look at other people's content for personal enjoyment and to learn about the daily lives of friends and popular people. Posting own pictures was also mentioned but most participants stressed their engagement in viewing other peoples' pictures over sharing their own content. No participant described actively commenting on own content. **Facebook** is used less, to be informed about main life events that can also involve the family and about events of interest happening nearby. **Snapchat** is regarded as more private, it used for direct and private communication and sharing of pictures with groups of friends, group

chats are usually created here and on **Whatsapp**. In the interviews it was mentioned, **VKontakte** was used more than others as a source for finding information of interest.

Consequently the shared content, feeling of security and use for or experience of cyberbullying differs according to the social medium. An examination of these variations will follow later on. Now we focus on the significance and benefits the internet has for teenagers and how that correlates with forms of cyberbullying.

3.2. Online presence

I think every young person in this period nowadays uses the internet.	<i>Es domāju, ka jebkurš jauniets šajā periodā, mūsdienās lieto internetu.</i>
Estere	<i>Estere</i>

3.2.1. Reasons for using internet

Several aspects were considered by participants when describing the significance of being online. A common understanding is that currently every young person uses the internet. It is seen as a normal feature of daily routines. The most common reason given for using the internet was staying in touch with friends in close circles, friends who live far away and other people. Therefore, revealing the internet as one of the key sites for sociality and communication. Laura claimed being in contact with her friends via social media is “a very important part of my life”. Other, less popular (non-communication related) reasons for using the internet mentioned were conducting research for school, listening to music, watching videos for entertainment and education.

Not only active communication was discussed. The possibility to stay in touch with people by being kept informed about their lives, by looking at other people’s pictures, profiles and receiving updates on them was mentioned equally often. Several participants named Instagram as their favourite application because it can be used to gain information about “people’s lives and... see what they are doing during their day” (Nora). This in turn signals the overlap of physical and virtual reality as people *join a particular platform* to see what others are doing *in their lives*, meanwhile *when people meet* they discuss *what they saw on the platform*.

We observed some seeming contradictions in the replies given by participants. These are subsequently grouped into three areas.

1) Firstly, the perceived amount of use and the actual use of social media by participants can be interpreted as contrasting each other;

2) Secondly, there seems to be a common understanding that people do not portray themselves completely accurately on social media, at the same time, there is a widespread assumption that this actually serves as a legitimate method for “keeping up to date”;

3) Thirdly, students report that people are more honest on the internet, while also being more fake.

3.2.2. Perceived and actual use

A few participants mentioned not using social media much while simultaneously acknowledging a daily use of several applications. In this context, not being active on social media does not mean not using these applications. It rather refers to looking at other people’s profiles instead of actively posting content. This is illustrated by one participant’s understanding of sending one Snapchat story per day as hardly using Snapchat at all. This again demonstrates the narrative that using social media is normal, using it to post content oneself is seen as the standard, and using it to “merely” look at other people’s content is considered hardly using it. At the same time, the kind of content that is liked and followed, including the content of influencers and celebrities, clearly has an impact on the choices students make on how to present oneself, what to post and what choices to make in what they sometimes refer to *real life*. Summarizing, to a person not familiar with this online behaviour the meaning of “not being and active user” might seem puzzling at first.

3.2.3. Cherry picked posting as source of information

Several participants explained they are careful when sharing information about themselves and try to create a positive or particular image on social media. Enija described that she has two profiles:

On Instagram I have two profiles, one profile for my friends, there I put my true self, but for example, on the profile that everyone sees I couldn't put such as ugly pictures.

Enija

Nu, man Instagramā ir divi profli, viens, kurā es lieku bildes, kuras es varētu rādīt ikvienam, un otrs, kurā ir varbūt smieklīgākas [bildes] un kuras var redzēt tikai mani draugi.

Enija

Most participants are aware that they themselves and other users show or create a very specific side of themselves on social media. This refers not only to friends but also acquaintances and celebrities. Online content is both used at face value, but also to try to understand what the person is like by evaluating the kind of content they publish. It was not clear from the interviews if students use a specific way to evaluate should a post be looked at as genuinely showing the everyday life of a person, or the profile is simply a selection of cool and nice moments. This phenomenon is further problematised when commenting on the activities of shy people - on the one hand, students praise the internet as a handy tool of communication for shy people. On the other hand, there seem to be some bitterness and shy students might get labeled as “fake” for being expressive on the internet. For example, Estere mentioned a girl she knows, whom she referred to as ‘Internet Diva’. In her opinion, when this girl is online she is hiding behind a mask of misleading confidence, and that in physical space, she seems very uncomfortable and insecure.

3.2.4. You can be more honest and fake

Students are also aware that the way people act on cyberspace does not necessarily reflect the way they might behave outside cyberspace. For example, participants claim that people are more honest online:

They may open up in social networks and express thoughts that they don't have the courage to say in life.	<i>Un tad viņi varbūt sociālajos tīklos tā kā atveras un pauž domas, ko viņiem nepietiek drosmes pateikt dzīvē.</i>
Agate	Agate

Several participants reported the significance of being able to write opinions and thoughts in online terrain which they would be too shy to reveal outside of it. “Opening up” was regarded in context of anonymity as well as finding like-minded people. It was also tied to the opportunity to structure sentences better in written form than when speaking and therefore being able to express certain ideas more easily.

It seems counterintuitive to state that people are more honest but also fake online, yet this seeming contradiction indicates that online behaviour is multi-faceted and can simultaneously entail strongly differing aspects. Both patterns of behaviour are frequently expressed and possible. Each situation then has to be regarded in context. This means that a person can indeed both use the terrain of social media to reveal yet unknown personal aspects

but also create and maintain a certain image of themselves. However, interpreting these changing behaviours often result in misinterpretation and, as we saw on chapter 2, can be used for bullying and mean commenting.

Concluding, one can see that social media users may not be able to differentiate between occasions in which a person is trying to show an accurate self-portrait and when they are deliberately creating a false image. It is also related to dominant ways how other users are using the platform discussed. People often debate and challenge each other on what is *authentic* and what is *fake*. In the next chapter we elaborate on this idea using the example of posting.

3.3. Posting

As previously outlined, there is a difference in content being posted on Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat. The latter is mainly used to privately communicate with friends while Facebook and Instagram are used to publicly show content. Therefore, people put much thought into what to post there. Simultaneously, there is a clear distinction between the image created for friends and for the public. Appropriate content for public posting is understood as pictures of oneself, travels, and pets. Pictures posted only to friends includes funny pictures and party pictures. Every participant talked about not publicly posting anything they see as private. “Private” is a term used for revealing or naked photographs, party pictures, passwords and other information deemed too sensitive.

Other restrictions students make to posting are pictures that create a bad image of oneself. Additionally, illegal pictures and copyrighted material were mentioned. This does not actually mean that posts considered wrong are not being created. In many ways, posting content is like a game of roulette peers are engaged in. For example, sexually revealing pictures can trigger negative comments, shame and harassment, but also receive many likes, views and follows. Consequently, posts have effect on the sexual reputation of a person. The ideal image of oneself established on social media can be both that of a studious pupil but also of an attractive teenager. In the age of mediated identity-creation, some individuals may risk trying out various more expressive ways of portraying their self on social media. This may result in positive or negative feedback, potential to become a victim of harassment and confusion about their *true identity*, especially when they seem to be acting rather differently in physical space.

Interestingly, posts demonstrating depression were repeatedly reflected upon. For example, one person described posting depressive thoughts on Twitter. She received sympathetic feedback but recalled ‘being depressive’ becoming a trend. Another admitted she

is confused if a friend is posting depressive pictures but usually seems like a happy person. She does not know how to react because when she talked to the person they explained that everything is alright. Others explain they would never post depressive content. For them, expressing negative thoughts was considered inadequate. According to this view, one should not influence others negatively by sharing one's own unhappiness.

I have found people who say they have it bad, it is bad and they are unhappy and everyone is terribly bad. It seems to me to be wrong, what's the point. If you don't have anything good to say, just don't say anything. Kārlis	<i>Esmu atradis tāds cilvēks, kuri saka, ka viņam ir tas slikti, tas slikti un viņš ir nelaimīgs un visi ir baigi slikti. Man tas liekas baigi aplami, kāda no tā jēga, ja tev nav nekas labs, ko pateikt, vienkārši nesaki.</i> Kārlis
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However, a strongly positive image is also dismissed. People who only show overly happy images are often perceived to be fake and hiding aspects of themselves.

Summarizing, these cases demonstrate that, first of all, exploration of identity can entail experimenting with the borders of acceptable behaviour as moral policing is at play. This again becomes a game of posting appropriately to avoid being morally policed by others, yet originally to gain social credit. On the one hand, it is not acceptable to post revealing, happy or depressive content. On the other, it might even become trendy and attract attention. Both sad and extremely happy profiles risk being called fake and inadequate. Furthermore, “too revealing” or “too depressive” are not objective categories for post evaluation, but also are evaluated in context with the image and actions of the author outside cyberspace. This also relates to what certain mean comments are sometimes addressing content-wise and to the ways how a post that the person at first hopes might attract positive attention can become a source of the person being shamed or bullied online as well in class.

3.4. Fake profiles

Many students seemed to have quite strong opinions on fake accounts, attributing negative sentiments to this practice, and saying it might lead to negative outcomes. Students did not right away differentiate between the practice of creating fictional profiles and the practice of creating a fake profile that impersonates someone they know, as there was some confusion in how to name each of these practices (fake profiles, catfishing, impersonating someone etc.). Overall the first practice was mostly discussed in relation to the anonymity of

the author when writing mean comments or messages, with the exception of mentioning pedophiles in which case this practice was seen as a seriously dangerous one. However, the second practice was seen as having more severe negative effects, generally attracting more attention of peers and usually related to more controversial or sensitive content than a comment.

The severity of the effects of creating impersonating profiles can be seen in Agate's story. Someone created a fake profile of her with her pictures that she had not intended on publishing on the internet. This account quickly accumulated around 200 followers. In effect these pictures were seen by her vast circle of friends and acquaintances, as she told, resulting in her losing all of her friends. According to Agate, she had to start her social life again from scratch and make new friends.

After the topic had been discussed for a moment, some students admitted creating fake profiles themselves, but expressed their deeds were not of malicious intent. In some cases students admitted creating a fake account based on an existing, real person, but stressed lack of or downplayed any actual negative effects coming from this. For example, a group of girls created a fake profile to ask a boy about his feelings towards another girl. In these cases lack of negative effects were explained by the profile not involving very sensitive information or only being visible to a smaller group of people. This shows that students' idea on effects of fake accounts is at times blurred, seeing own and others' actions somewhat differently.

At the same time, fake accounts were not altogether dismissed. Nikola shared her opinion that having several accounts is simply fun. One of the interviewed students associated creating fake profiles with internet literacy and skills, that ultimately provide a safer and more pleasant experience of using the internet. An example of having two or more email addresses was mentioned as having no negative effects, only allowing for more possibilities - for example, if you forget a password.

A different approach to having more than one profile can be seen in the example of Enija. She admits having two accounts, but explains they are simply for different purposes. On one account she only allows close friends; this is where she posts more personal photos which might not be as "good looking" and therefore not appropriate for the general public. She refers to this account as "where she shows her true self". At the same time, she also posts content to this "real" or "official" account, which is publicly available and holds more generic content.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, anonymity or a degree of it was at times also discussed in a rather positive way, explaining that one can express their thoughts and feelings without having to fear being mocked or ridiculed, this possibly even leading to the formation of new friendships.

3.5. Risks

Both discussion on posting and creating fake profiles already includes references to what kind of risks students see with posting content on social media and navigating online identities. In this chapter, we summarize the perceived risks to show which make students the most worried. We defined four segments of risks:

- 1) Personal data;
- 2) Real life threats;
- 3) Misleading information;
- 4) Sexual threats.

3.5.1. Personal data

Most of the students interviewed are aware and attentive of certain risks that come with using social media. However, the ideas of what exactly the online risks are vary, especially when thinking about threats which are linked to different online communication tools. While so far we have mostly discussed more public forms of online communication as potentially having the most harmful effect, direct messaging has its own specifics:

“Anything involving direct messages can be used for bullying and I think that most people don’t know about it, just because it doesn’t show up, it’s a private thing”.

Kristīne

“Viss, kas iekļauj tiešās ziņas var tikt izmantots bulijošānai un es domāju, ka lielākā daļa cilvēku par to nezina tikai tādēļ, ka tas neparādās, ka tā ir privāta lieta”.

Kristīne

For one, private messages provide a space where the bully and the victim are seemingly alone, which is harder in physical space. For another, as in the case of outing, private messages can be saved, screenshotted and posted for others to see. This can be used both by the bully and the victim as a strategy of harassing as well as for protection.

Similarly, Anna shared her concerns regarding a segment of her content on a particular social media platform as being potentially problematic:

“Maybe I am a little worried about that some day my pictures from the parties on Snapchat will go out in the world. If something happens with those then it will be a bit grave but about Facebook, I think that’s the safest place”.

Anna

Iespējams, es esmu drusku nobāzījies par to ka manas bildes no ballītēm Snapčatā varētu iziet pasaulē. Ja tur kaut kas notiktu tad tas būtu smagi, bet par Feisbuku, es domāju, ka tā ir drošākā vietne”.

Anna

As it can be seen, practices involving different social media and ideas about them differ. In this case, for instance, Snapchat is seen as risky while Facebook as safe, but not necessarily because of technical or reputation aspects of these platforms. These ideas rather rely on the notions of privacy and what can be displayed publicly. Snapchat is mostly used to post private content, therefore, it is more vulnerable to certain risks.

A commonly perceived risk by most of the students is the easy access to personal information, even if it is not necessarily seen as having any negative consequences for their personal life. For example, Estere voiced her dissatisfaction with the idea that some major companies have and use her personal data. Similarly as Anna was worried about her pictures on Snapchat going “out in the world” other students were concerned about similar issues. It seems that what worries the students is that particular information could get beyond their control.

In addition to the easy access to personal information another factor that is considered risky is that everything that is shared online stays there. These are important factors that are taken into consideration when deciding on whether to share something on the internet or not. Students had different ideas on what is “too private” and what is “internet appropriate”. The things students most often commented on as sensitive were names, whereabouts, passwords and naked photos of themselves:

“I wouldn’t post something that could come back at me in the future; something, I don’t know, rude [...]. [...] I know that if you post something, it’s there forever, and somebody could find it at any moment. I have googled my name, and some years ago there was that same ask. fm, and I have found some really terrible pictures, which at that moment seemed really good to me. When you post something, then you are, like, “hmm” should I even post this?”.
Enija

*“Es neliktu kaut ko tādu, kas man nākotnē varētu atspēlēties; kaut ko, nezinu, nepieklājīgu [...]. [...] es zinu, ka ja tu kaut ko ieliec, tas tur ir mūžīgi, un kāds to varētu atrast jebkurā brīdī. Es esmu iegooglējusi savu vārdu, un kaut kad pirms cik gadiem bija tie paši Ask.fm, un es esmu atradusi tiešām kaut kādas drausmīgas bildes, kuras man tanī brīdī likušās baigi labās. Tad kad tu kaut ko ieliec, tad ir tāda mmm, vai man to vajadzētu likt?
Enija*

These examples illustrate that not only safety is considered when deciding which information to share online. Students also reflect on the risks of posting appropriate content that nonetheless could create a public image they would not want to associate themselves with. This risk could come to life if for example outdated information is found by others, and the student in question would not want to associate with the appearance of actions his past self. For example, Andrejs mentioned actively deleting past posts they might become a source of ridicule. The examples of Anna, Enija and Andrejs show that the continuity of the content social media profiles present creates a kind of situation that makes a person feel potential discrepancy between the understanding of one's past-self and present-self which might be somewhat unsettling.

3.5.2. Real life threats

Besides potential data leaks, the fear of getting harmed in the physical world as a consequence of online bullying was contemplated. As the next example shows, bullying in virtual space can transform to actual threats in physical space. As mentioned by Jana:

“I don’t disclose my address, place of residence. People know that I live in Latvia, there, in this city, but they don’t know where exactly, the address. Also, if cyberbullying takes place, and someone starts being hated, it is dangerous, if they know where you live, where you are. So, yes, they can harm you. This happened to one girl, that came to my school from another school”.
Jana

*“Nu jā, es neatklāju savu adresi, savu dzīvesvietu. Cilvēki zina, kas es dzīvoju Latvijā, tur, tajā pilsētā, bet viņi nezin, kur tieši, adresi. Arī, ja notiek kiberbulijošana un kādu cilvēku ļoti sāk ienīst, tad tas ir arī bīstami, ja viņi zina tavu dzīves vietu, kur tu uzturies vispār. Nu jā, tev var arī izdarīt arī pāri. Tā ir bijis ar vienu meiteni, kura atnāca no citas skolas.”
Jana*

This again confirms that bullying and cyberbullying are not exclusive, but can transgress boundaries. Even though in many ways the virtual world is seen by students as separate from the physical, when it comes to perceived risks the distinction in some instances disappear. Instead, these spheres are understood as closely connected and posing threats both ways. It was often mentioned that people are bullied online because of something they do in the physical world, while in other cases it can be the other way around. For instance, as already mentioned before, Agate was bullied by her schoolmates in the physical world for the content she had in her profile online.

As stated throughout this research paper, ideas about public and private posts also depend on the platform used, for example Facebook is considered to be more public whereas Snapchat is more private.

“Previously, I didn't consider that if you publish, for example a picture of your apartment, someone can make out your home, where you are, the location, you can see it all”

Maija

“Iepriekš nebiju tik tālu aizdomājusies, ja tu publicē, piemēram, kādu bildi no sava dzīvokļa, var saprast tavu mājvietu, vai tu publicē, kur tu atrodi, vai nošēro location, to visu var redzēt.”

Maija

3.5.3. Misleading information

As described in the chapter “Fake profiles”, another important factor that students identify as both beneficial but also as posing a certain risk is anonymity. Several students also mentioned that negative and harmful behaviour on the internet is connected to lack of punishment, as Andrejs puts it:

“People are free to do whatever they want, say anything they want and that is freedom. Therefore cruelty...People are cruel, but in the society they are less cruel. Because if they are cruel they will be punished. On the internet there is freedom and people can do everything they want”.

Andrejs

“Cilvēki ir brīvi darīt jebko, ko viņi grib, teikt jebko, ko viņi grib un tā ir brīvība. Tādēļ neželība... Cilvēki ir nežēlīgi, bet sabiedrībā viņi ir mazāk nežēlīgi. Jo, ja viņi ir nežēlīgi, viņi tiks sodīti. Internētā ir brīvība un cilvēki var darīt visu, ko viņi grib”.

Andrejs

However, anonymity and freedom of expression are not only seen as personal risks but also as possibly having negative impact on a broader scale, thus forming a more global issue. Anonymity, fake news and particularly fake profiles are perceived as problematic and creating

confusion about what is “real” and what is not. Internet commonly was referred to as an unreal environment, one that can be dangerous and cannot entirely be trusted. One such opinion:

“I think that fake profiles aren’t anything good, because of all those fake- news... There are such naïve people that believe in everything they see and read. And if I, for example, would read some shocking news, I would start thinking about people in ways that are not right”

Rebeka

“ Es jau pamatā domāju, ka tie fake profili nav nekas labs, jo tie visi fake-news... Ir cilvēki tādi naivi, ka notic katram, ko redz un ko viņi izlasa. Un ja es, piemēram, izlasītu kādas šokējošas ziņas, sāktu domāt ne tādas lietas par cilvēkiem”.

Rebeka

The social media most commonly associated with these risks was VKontakte which the students saw both as good and potentially misleading source of information. This is also connected to the media being more open to sharing of factual information as well as, for example, poetry than the other mentioned media.

3.5.4. Sexual threats

A very particular concern mentioned by quite a few students was about sexual threats on the internet. Although students discussed different issues related to putting anything sexuality related on the internet it seemed sexual threats are understood as only those that come from a particular group of grown-ups labeled pedophiles. The general understanding was that you should not communicate with anyone who seems like a possible pedophile and limit the possible exposure of your content to their circles. This allows us to conclude that this threat is not perceived only as being physical but also related to these people acquiring students’ private content. It was however unclear how to differentiate pedophiles from other users. Indeed, pedophiles seemed like an abstract category of people that exhibit particular (yet unnamed) characteristics. For example, Agate was warned of sexual abusers on the internet by her mother:

“Mom categorically banned me from using instagram and facebook, and said, that they should be deleted, because she sees many threats there, and some kind of rapists attack , and something.. However, in my opinion it depends very much on how things are done there, it can be like that or not”.

Agate

“Mamma kategoriski aizliedza man instagramu un facebooku, un teica, ka jādzdzēš, jo viņa tur saskata daudz briesmas, un kādi tur izvarotāji uzbrūk, un ko tur, un ko tur.. Kaut gan, manuprāt, tur, tā kā, tas ir ļoti, ļoti atkarīgs, kā tur dara ko, tur var gan tā būt, gan nebūt”.

Agate

It seems that Agate doesn't necessarily share the same worries as her mother about the dangers of the internet. She expressed a similar opinion as many other students, that safety and wellbeing on the internet largely depends on one's own actions and posted content. During our interviews it was also unclear whether similar cautiousness is applied by students when communicating with known adults or peers. Although the risk of posting naked and even revealing pictures was mentioned often, making these pictures and sexting was not mentioned once.

For the female participants, another issue was getting unsolicited naked pictures from boys and men. While this was often resolved with blocking the sender without engaging in any dialogue, it was seen as an issue beyond control of the person. In some cases students just accept the possible risks, for instance, leakage of private information, without really feeling that they can do something about it. That shows that there is some feeling of helplessness connected to online risks, which might be due to insufficient skills and knowledge of how to prevent bad experiences and how to publicly address these issues.

3.6. Literacy

Security on the internet is largely ensured by awareness of its potential risks. Different levels of skill in navigating across cyberspace and minimising these risks can be observed amongst the young. These skills are an integral part of the lives of your people even though they often do not acknowledge the different effects these skills have (Hoffman, Blake; 2003). In this chapter, we examine the ways how students understand and apply their knowledge of the internet, or in other words - their approach to digital literacy. Thus, how they evaluate and produce information on social media platforms.

The most common techniques for students to feel safe when spending time online are using strong passwords, not sharing your phone number or address and not talking to strangers. A reoccurring example also was changing settings to private, which allows one to choose whom to accept. This 'accepting' also seems to have criteria. However, these criteria are rather individual with perhaps the exception that the account should not look 'fake'.

Students do not see literacy as only related to risks. It also enables you to be more efficient on the internet. For instance, it is possible to distinguish between 3 different skill sets - one related to anonymity, privacy and safety, another to proficiency on social media content production, and another to knowledge of contemporary problematic issues. However, it should

be noted that the actual level of literacy both in each regard and overall will not necessarily correspond to the subjective evaluation of the people interviewed.

Given that adolescents use the internet *to get* information and *to give* information, e.g., by posting pictures, a certain amount of knowledge appears in the skill of naming compelling internet phenomena. For example, as explained in the chapter on the so-called *fake profiles*, and considering that “social media are widely regarded as an opportunity for self-presentation and interaction with other participants around the globe” (Krombholz et al; 2012), the competence to acknowledge and perceive fake identities is a crucial part of learning about the internet. For some, this affair is even associated with an in-depth emotional upheaval, as it is in the case of Estere:

“Fake profiles, for instance, if you start communicating with someone, even with the opposite sex or the same sex, they only want you sexually or something like that”

Estere

“Viltus profili, piemēram, ja tu sāc sazināties ar kaut kādiem, kaut vai pretējo dzimumu vai to pašu dzimumu, viņi vēlās tevi tikai seksuāli vai kaut ko tādu”

Estere

The interviewed students reported being confused and hurt by fake profiles, linked them with pedophiles, but also were aware of the potential opportunities this tool gives. Although some students voiced a premise, that they should learn to be safe from fake profiles, and that those who operate them are in general safety, there were also challenges to this idea. Māra contributed with her view that people who have fake profiles feel just as safe as others due to the conception that no one really knows who anyone is. Additionally, if you feel a fake profile is trying to harm you, you can test this by using your own fake profile. This perplexity makes a set of actions possible that would not be the case if the true identity of everyone was known. To put this theoretically - the skills that compose literacy can be used as an apparatus for individual boundary management (Krombholz et al, 2012).

This again goes to show that the ways individuals experience the physical/virtual divide are more complex than a simple dichotomy. In many cases, interviewees pointed out the opportunity of making their profile private, as a way to manage the public nature of putting information online. For example, Estere only allows approved people to see her content, and uses an option that deletes search history.

The way how students address the forms of information storage and tracking can also show general views on the internet as a global issue and as a hidden risk. This shifts the

students' focus on literacy skills from what first seemed to be about technology towards a more extensive understanding of cyberspace.

Understanding what is happening on the internet can also transgress the boundaries between a seemingly non-physical space (cyberspace) and the physical world. Internet literacy is yet another form of literacy, which is also crucial in a physical world that so massively relies on computing technology (Hoffman, Blake, 2003). For example, it can be said that the knowledge on how to create a safe environment is versatile. Such an example can be detected in Rebeka's case, where she makes her use of computer safer by physical means - putting a sticky note on her laptop camera. This ability to broaden the borders of potential impacts from cyberspace can also be based on heard news or at least assumptions. Estere has heard reports of the telecommunication manufacturer "Huawei" that uses consumer data for their own needs, which is to some extent disturbing, in her opinion. As a real and physically existing company, Huawei influences her opinion on cyberspace processes.

Thus it can be concluded that internet literacy is not just the ability to use the options provided by technology wisely. Examples of these kinds unerringly show the students' ability to think at multitudinal levels and be aware of the options and consequences of cyberspace. This understanding usually refers to the protection of their private data and the means to adjust the privacy settings.

It should be noted an understanding of internet is not perceived by students as something to be learnt outside the computer-designated frames but is it something that one should already know. This kind of understanding is also linked to online processes, including cyber-bullying, which can also affect the ways students search for help. For example, there is a conception that parents lack this understanding, mostly because they have learned internet literacy specifically, rather than gaining it *naturally*. Consequently, in this view cyberbullying also occurs through techniques and methods that are already known and need not be acquired.

Digital literacy for students consists of evaluating content what to post, using the affordances of privacy and blocking settings and the knowledge of cybersecurity narrative. At the same time, when it comes to cyberbullying, breaches of privacy and receiving unsolicited content, dealing with that can be more unclear.

Chapter 4: Dealing with cyberbullying

After looking at actors involved in cyberbullying and cyberbullying forms in the second chapter, and then describing the context of cyberbullying - students' understanding of being online, we can better comprehend the actions and rhetorical positions students take when faced with cyberbullying. We describe these issues in the following chapter.

4.1 “There will always be bullying”

Several students expressed the belief that bullying cannot really be abolished. However, in their view if one learns to deal with it well, then the bullying perhaps might cease. Many of the suggestions are directed at what the victim should do or not do or the mindset they should strive for. Here, Jana comments:

“What should be done with bullying... I think, there will always be bullying. But, maybe just go about it differently. Accept it [with a sense of lightness].”

Jana

“Ko darīt ar apcelšanu... Es domāju, ka apcelšana būs vienmēr. Bet, vienkārši varbūt izturēties kaut kā savādāk. Neņem tik ļoti pie sirds.”

Jana

Another suggestion for avoiding cyberbullying is not to use the internet or certain social media. Some students suggest, that unlike in the physical life, it is possible to block the bully in the virtual space. Other options like ignoring or laughing it off are also suggested. Unfortunately, the more popular suggestions tend to normalise the problem, and do not address the problem itself nor suggest ways how to effectively stop the bully. From one side, not taking certain of the comments too seriously is part of digital platform literacy as there is a lot of mean content that is meant far from the literal sense. From another side, it creates a situation where abusive patterns of communication is seen as a norm and the person responsible for posting it does not get feedback of it not being acceptable by other users of the platform. This can be amplified when the platform's tools for community content management are limited as in the case of platforms mentioned.

The second most popular suggestion is directed both at providing emotional comfort and seeking help. In general, the research participants agree that bullying has to be discussed. According to students, conversation might be the key to fight bullying. Different types of talking are mentioned - talking to the bully, asking parents to talk to the bully's parents, talking

to the school personnel, talking to the victim, and talking among each other. Talking about bullying from a young age and talking repeatedly. As Laima suggests when asked to address the issue of bullying:

“Well, maybe try to talk to the person who is bullying to understand why they are doing it and to make them rethink their decisions and rethink if they really should be bullying.”

Laima

“Nu, varbūt vajag parunāt ar to cilvēku, kurš apceļ, lai saprastu kāpec viņš to dara un lai liktu viņam pārdomāt savas izvēles un pārdomāt vai tiešām vajadzētu apcelt.”

Laima

Anna advises to try and make the bully understand how the victim feels. The students hope that by raising awareness, there might be a change in relations. Kārlis believes that understanding of bullying and its consequences is something that must be talked about in the family from a very young age, or one might just not get it. Fostering empathetic discussion from an early age would likely toss things around, according to the students. In a similar vein, Andrejs reflected that since they are having more discussions in class where there is less judgement of what was said and more acceptance towards diverging opinions, the relationships and commenting have also improved online. This suggests that there is a close relation between relationships in class and potential acts of cyberbullying among classmates.

The majority of the interviewees seem to be empathetic with the victim. Students often suggest helping them, but rarely specify how and what should be done. As Maija declares:

“In my opinion, if one sees it, they shouldn't be indifferent, should try to help the other person somehow. Just don't be indifferent, because that is awful when one watches and does nothing.”

Maija

“Manuprāt, ja cilvēks to redz, nevajag būt vienaldzīgam, mēģināt kaut kā tam otram cilvēkam palīdzēt. Vienkārši nebūt vienaldzīgam, jo tas ir šausmīgi, kad cilvēks noskatās un neko nedara.”

Maija

However, we have to keep in mind that our research participants reflect a certain demographic – mostly girls that are active and willing to engage in our project. Overall, a significant share of the research participants seem to be optimistically and proactively disposed. Mostly the research participants portray a world where the victims can speak up and the onlookers get involved. There is little talk of severe bullying that is to be addressed by the authorities – be it police, school or parents. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many of these are largely hypothetical answers generated in the context of an interview. It is not always the case that people do what they say they would do.

Speaking up is not that frequent of a practice. At the same time, Enija suggests that for some it might be easier to defend a victim online because of taking advantage of the possibility to stay anonymous. Even if one has the courage, the nature of cyberbullying is that it is not always possible to pinpoint the bully. Throughout our research we learned of three cases where the victim or others acted and bullying was stopped. In one of them - Jana, when her pictures were leaked, went to the bullies and told them to stop, which was effective.

When asked to comment on how the peer bullied in her class might feel, Anna admits: “I don’t know. I really don’t know what he is feeling”. This quote is illustrative of the indefinite nature of bullying. One can only attempt to learn how the victim, or the bully for that matter, feels by talking to them. This also shows that there is a lack of discussion on the effects of bullying. It remains something to deal with by the victim.

4.2. “Building character”

When asked what the students would do if faced with bullying, standing up for oneself, changing one’s attitude and speaking to the bully were suggested. All these options seem to promote toughening one’s character:

“If you will be strong enough you will get through it and you will grow as a person in your mental growth. So. I think it’s kinda healthy for your mental growth but yeah, it’s not nice.”
Anna

“Ja tu būs pietiekami stiprs, tu tiksī tam cauri un augsi kā cilvēks garīgi. Tāpēc. Es domāju tas it kā ir veselīgi tavai garīgajai attīstībai, bet jā, tas nav jauki”
Anna

“If I were bullied, first I would try to deal with it on my own, because that’s life and I have to try to deal with it on my own. Because when I grow up my mom will not run around me asking: “Oh child, how can I help you?”
Estere

“Ja pret mani personīgi, sākumā es mēģinātu pati tikt galā, nu jo, tāda ir dzīve, un man jāmēģina pašai ar to tikt galā. Jo, kad es pieaugšu, man jau mamma neskries pakaļ, pretī: “O, bērniņ, ko tev palīdzet?”
Estere

A number of the research participants stress the importance of being true to oneself and confident. Estere adds that “people are afraid of confident people”. Experiencing or witnessing bullying can be seen as an opportunity to be assertive and show character strength. We assume this opinion is shared not only among the students, but also among adults. Estere even retells

hearing a bully's parents saying that the victim should learn to survive in life. Talking about bullying as the reality of life one has to learn to cope with is a tricky stance, especially if one is an adult in a power position. No doubt, there are people that can say that living through bullying has made them a tougher person. However, it is unlikely that they chose to be in that situation, and how does one even assess if it is worth it? This can also be seen as normalisation of cyberbullying, as rhetorically the problem is dismissed as temporary or unimportant. In opposition to this sentiment, Kārlis points out that bullying leads to "fear, insecurity, and is a serious problem that has to be solved. [...] it crushes people [...]". This brings us to one the strategies one might apply if unable to solve the situation and being afraid others will see it as an exercise in character building.

4.3. Avoidance

A reoccurring theme from multiple students is that they try to avoid any negative experiences on the internet. Avoidance is mentioned in relation to cyberbullying, and the idea is that in order to avoid cyberbullying, one must simply not put themselves in a position where they might encounter it. Again, this suggestion puts the responsibility onto the (potential) victim. This often means avoiding the comment section on different platforms altogether or having a private profile so that only 'real' friends have the possibility to interact with one's posted content and use direct messaging.

For example, Agate mentioned that she tries not to spend a lot of time online in general, not speaking specifically about certain platforms. While this approach is commonly mentioned, students admit it might not be a very effective one, especially in long term. Avoidance is used in certain degrees. While some students such as Agate try to limit their time spent on the internet in order to avoid negative encounters, others consider 'avoidance' to be somewhat similar to 'staying more private' and not being 'too open' (public profile, posting a lot of pictures of oneself, etc). It is evident that this is a rather fluid term and means several things to different students. For example, Kristine reports she has not experienced many mean interactions because she does not seek them out and is not paying attention to them. Nonetheless, if the particular instance of cyberbullying cannot be avoided, students might try to seek help.

4.4. Seeking help

Cyberspace has implemented peers with an advanced territory for abuse (Chibbaro, 2007), which pose the question of how counselling and support is provided. Students report asking for help can be rather problematic and challenging. This is presumably because the search for help involves many uncertainties, such as where to find it and should one even do that. Revealing vulnerabilities can be difficult and are connected with experiencing shame for not having *built character* enough to solve or deal with the situation. Although there is a rapid increase of destigmatization of seeking help, explaining the situation to a third party still involves re-living the possibly traumatic experience to some extent. Another matter is that the victim, bully or a classmate only begins to seek help when the situation has already become miserable, as Kristīne shared her experience:

“I have been bullied in previous classes [...]. I didn't really know what to do. I remember not telling anyone, that was my mistake and when I told my parents about it, the situation had escalated so far that it wasn't pretty”.

Kristīne

“Es mazākās klasēs esmu tikusi apcelta. [...] Nezināju toreiz īsti ko darīt. Es atceros, ka nevienam par to nestāstīju, tā bija mana kļūda. Un tad, kad es pateicu saviem vecākiem, tad situācija jau bija aizgājusi tik tālu, ka vairs nebija labi.”

Kristīne

The happenings in cyberspace trespass the borders between virtual and physical, as described in a previous chapter. Thereupon, the search for help should be adjusted in such a way that takes into account the rapid change of forms of violence. Students report the search for help takes place gradually. Firstly, by weighing the degree of trust and reliance of the potential assistance provider. The person whom students ask to intervene is most often a parent or a teacher. In some cases students also mention asking a friend, a sibling or a school personnel (in this case social pedagogue) for help. In none of the cases, students reported seeking help from the support staff of the platform.

4.4.1. Friends

It seems that it is relatively easy for students to ask for help from their friends, with a note if a person has a friend(s) at all. Friends are often referred to as the only ones capable of understanding the full capacity of the problem, because they are the people with whom the person can relate to and "I can trust them 100%" as Māra said. But there are also cases where friends' help does not seem to be enough or even needed, as in the case of Estere:

"I also find it difficult to tell my best friend, I rather deal with it myself".

Estere

"Man ir arī grūti tuvākajai draudzenei izstāstīt, es labāk ar to tieku pati galā".

Estere

However, a certain pattern can be discerned. In general, the data provided from the interviews suggest that friends mostly do not provide direct assistance, which more or less means straightforward intervention in the rather pernicious relations. Friends' support rather comes in an indirect way, suggesting a greater reduction in emotional tension. Although the help may not be asked directly, by discussing the situation with friends further action or at least emotional support is provided. Often, friend support is used in situations where someone needs help, even if this person has not asked for this support. Agate saw this collective help as *force gathering*, and it seems that it reduces the backlash that ostensibly discourages people from providing help. This is evident in a situation told by Jana, where a girl was bullied quite harshly. In this case, one of the types of providing help was sending kind-natured texts:

"When she was bullied we tried [...] Simply write to that person: "Hey, you are actually really cool and do not listen to all those people" [...] If you are supported, then it is much easier, I think".

Jana

"Tad, kad viņu apcēla mēs mēģinājām. [...] Varbūt vienkārši tam cilvēkam uzrakstīt: "Klau, Tu patiesībā esi ļoti forša un neklausies tajos visos cilvēkos". [...] Ja tevi atbalsta, tad ir daudz vieglāk, es domāju."

Jana

4.4.2. Family members

A more complicated situation is with the parents. Students often do not choose to ask their parents for help, fearing that they will not understand them or will not perceive the situation adequately. The opinions of many interviewees drew parallels with the notion that parents (and educators, too) are often unprepared for the task of keeping an eye on students' internet use, mostly because of the lack of knowledge and computer literacy. It often makes their awareness, perceptions and intervention strategies incomprehensible and unnecessary for the students. Estere expressed feelings that she does not even see the need for asking help from parents, mainly because they are from a different generation, thus incapable of understanding. She has also heard an attitude from a parent whose child has offended another child both in physical space and on the internet, which was described in more detail in the section of "Building character":

“Parents often do not even care. Like I have even heard that they say: "Well, but that other child needs to learn to survive in life".

Estere

“Vecākiem bieži ir pat vienalga, nu ka, es pat esmu dzirdējusi, ka saka: “Nu bet, lai tas otrs bērns iemācās dzīvē izdzīvot”.

Estere

Even though parents become more aware of how to recognize forms of bullying (cyberbullying included), the type of assistance provided is not always compatible with the particular situation. Kārlis has had a similar experience. His brother was bullied and his mom got involved. Mother's involvement made the situation worse, thereby Kārlis said:

“Sometimes, when parents get involved, they screw everything up. [...] It depends on the situation. There are times when parents can help, but sometimes young people have to cope themselves.”

Kārlis

“Dažreiz vecākiem iesaistoties, viņi salaiž visu lielākā dēļ. [...] Tas ir atkarīgs no situācijas. Ir brīži, kad vecāki var palīdzēt, bet dažreiz jauniešiem pašiem ir jātiek galā”.

Kārlis

But there are also situations where parents are the first rescue, as is the case with Anna, who talks about her mother as her best friend and suggests she would go to her in case of cyberbullying.

4.4.3. School personnel

It might seem that when it comes to being a person of trust school staff has the advantage of being the middle ground - the talk on a painful topic can seem less personal (as it would be with parents) or not so informal (as would be with friends). Students often report there is maybe one or two teachers which they could trust with these matters. On the other hand, there are occasions when teachers are the bullies, as it is in Laura's experience. She described her school geography teacher as regularly bullying, thereby she would definitely not go to a teacher.

Similarly as with parents, teachers are often not aware of pupils' problems when it comes to cyberspace. Such beliefs seem to be based on the assumption that if a teacher does not understand many aspects of the internet, he or she will not understand the capacity of the problem itself. Agate has had a similar experience as Laura, but in this case she asked for help from parents:

"Well, I was bullied by a very nasty teacher. I told my parents. The parents came to school, it ended up with the teacher leaving school and being dismissed."

Laura

"Arī, nu, mani bulīvoja viena skolotāja ļoti nejauki. Es pastāstīju vecākiem. Vecāki atnāca uz skolu, tad beidzās tā, ka skolotāja aizgāja no skolas, viņu atlaida."

Laura

Nonetheless, this does not indicate that school staff assistance is not being evaluated as in the case of Laima: "We talked to the teacher and the teacher did everything and it was resolved" and Enija, when she talked about the problem with the classmates and went to the social pedagogue. However, it is rarely that students mention any school staff besides teachers. The key condition for seeking help is already established mutual trust and teacher collaboration with students. As Rebeka puts it:

"I would start with a teacher, with a solid teacher I trust. And then I would tell the current situation and, you know - tell the teacher to see if he notices something and if he would notice, most likely something would be done".

Rebeka

"Es sāktu ar skolotāju, ar tādu sakarīgu skolotāju, kam es uzticētos. Un tad es pateiktu esošo situāciju, un zin kā - pateiktu, lai skolotājs pats pavēro, vai viņš pamana kaut ko, un, ja tiktu pamanīts, tad, visticamāk, kaut kas tiktu darīts tā labā."

Rebeka

4.4.4. Conclusion

Many students mention that in addition to trust it is important for them (to believe) that the person who is informed can actually solve the situation. Students report cases where the help is not effective and does not change matters much. Students also report cases where asking for help actually makes bullying worse.

Although students quite often mention the possibility of seeking help, this is often the full extent of their plan. None of the students mention any detail to this, for example, whom ask in which cases, nor do students elaborate on what should be done if this request fails to help.

While students belief in teachers' and parents' ability to help in cases of cyberbullying is lessened by the projected lack of their understanding of the dynamics of the internet, our interview data suggests that assistance to the bullied students is mostly provided in the physical world, meaning parents and school personnel can and do help. While friends and classmates might often not have the means to stop the bullying by direct intervention, our research suggests they provide emotional support both when asked and on their own. Friends are mentioned as

the most likely group to actually support someone in cyberspace, be it in a response in public post or by sending private direct messages. Interestingly, none of the interviewees indicated that they were getting help online, for example, through an online psychologist, which could provide the professional input friends cannot give. Additionally, the platforms where abuse is taking place were not seen as having the potential to be asked for help and support.

Also, a significant factor in even trying to seek help is the student's own confusion about the extent and seriousness of an instance of cyberbullying. To even be able to seek help, first the student or his/her peers must recognise the situation as being serious enough to report. There seems to be a gap between experiencing and acting on a situation of cyberbullying, which could perhaps be lessened by clearly defining instances of cyberbullying and addressing them in formal training.

4.5. Formal training

There is a practice in schools to let outsourced lecturers, like NGO's and police, to come and hold a class on topics such as bullying. Among the students interviewed, many had had such classes, while some had hardly heard of them. Enija, a highschool student, recounts having classes on bullying in her previous school somewhere outside Riga. In her new school, no lectures on the topic have taken place. Students believe it is in the school curriculum to talk about issues like bullying and internet literacy. Jana tells that they have repeatedly talked about digital safety in various classes – informatics, social studies and class meeting lesson.

“In informatics we had to do a test, what would you do in this and that situation, or what is wrong in this and that profile, like, age, or some photo... you know, inappropriate. [...] There were people [not from the school]. But that was more like... Well, there was a story about a girl, who sent her photos to a guy, and they were leaked etc. And they told us what should be done. So yeah, we had a lecture on safety on the internet.”

Jana

“Bija informātikā tā, ka bija jāpilda tests, ko tu darītu tajā un tajā situācijā, vai kas ir nepareizi tajā un tajā profilā, piemēram, noteikts vecums, vai kaut kāda bilde ir nu [...] nepiemērota. [...] Ir bijis, kad nāca no malas! Bet tas bija vairāk par[...] Nu tā kā, bija stāsts par meiteni, kura atsūtīja puisim savas bildes, un tās izplatījās pa internetu utt. Un bija stāsts par to, kas ir jādara. Un jā, mums bija lekcija par drošību internetā.”

Jana

Maija was somewhat unnerved to learn in a class held by drossintnets.lv that someone can easily trace a location if one is carelessly posting pictures of their home and whereabouts. She had not thought about it before. This was commented on as the one example that sticks to

students' memory – if the lecturer has beforehand found some material on the particular students he or she is lecturing. At the same time, it is also somewhat problematic in regards to ethics.

Rebeka's outlook on the benefits of classes like these is quite grim – she believes the victims might benefit somewhat from being lectured on how things work in theory, but the bullies are not likely to care and will just be stoked to skip a class because of a guest lecture. This outlook is shared by a couple of research participants. The length of a lecture can also play a role in engaging even the most attentive of students. However, most students esteem internet safety classes positively. Estere supports holding these classes, but notes that just because they are held, that does not mean students will necessarily remember or learn much from them: "One can only hope". Students mention they would also appreciate tips on how to help a friend who is experiencing cyberbullying.

It largely depends on the school as to how vigorously they address both the issue of cybersecurity and the issue of dialogue and interpersonal relationships in class. A passionate and thoughtful teacher might be able to incite a lively discussion instead of just glossing over the formal program.

At the same time, students are often using the language of cybersecurity unrelated to other practices of mean commenting on each other and bullying in class. As cyberbullying in class context intersects with bullying, it is important to address the gap between knowledge on cybersecurity with knowledge on building relationships in diverse settings that also includes reflecting on effects of bullying.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Cyberbullying as part of everyday life

During this research we tried to seek out student perspectives on cyberbullying and strategies related to dealing with and participating in practices of cyberbullying. First, although students have different ideas on what constitutes cyberbullying, a bully, the causes and how cyberbullying can and should be stopped, what is common to all of them is that cyberbullying is seen as a part of general bullying. It is understood as an extension of violent relationship strategies experienced in school and elsewhere, meaning that even though practices of cyberbullying are only possible in cyberspace, they pertain to logic already familiar to students and often affect the same people who would fall victim to regular bullying.

Narrative of cyberbullying

Interviewed students largely seem to be familiar with the institutional discourse of cybersecurity and other threats related to cyberspace. This does not mean they all interpret it the same way or have a unified understanding of what cyberbullying consists of. What is clear is that students mention particular type of practices as tools that safeguard them from cyberbullying, for example, not sharing personal information and login data or not posting possibly compromising pictures. In turn, when commenting on how safe they feel on the internet students largely talk about their competencies of protecting private information. This way, student understandings of being safe on social media are formed by and at least somewhat limited to the general discourse of cybersecurity. While it is an important part of their internet literacy skills, there is also a gap between cybersecurity discourse and the knowledge on building of personal relationships that does not allow to address abusive communication.

Being safe from cyberbullying

Students first position cyberbullying and cyberviolence as an issue of learning how to be safe and acting accordingly. This implies the perpetrator is someone from “outside“, or at least the threat is something that exists “out there”. This approach largely overlooks students as possible perpetrators and is not focusing on how not to bring harm to others or recognize it and stop it from happening when noticing it on the internet. This is furthered by students understanding the bully and the victim largely in individual psychological terms and, thus, individualizing the issue, rather than seeing as a social problem.

Some of the students mentioned their schools have had lectures from NGO's on the topic of cyberviolence and proficiency of internet use and referenced these lectures and their contents as something that is directly related to cyberbullying. Similarly, formal training in internet proficiency is given to students during computer classes. It is possible these interactions have had effect on student understanding of the topic given they admit having limited exposure to the debate and the notion of cyberbullying.

Students as perpetrators

Most of the students at some point describe either participating in some form of cyberbullying or witnessing it, but do not view these activities as problematic or themselves as bullies. Although students report the most common form of cyberbullying is mean commenting in chat or public posting, they are generally indecisive whether, for example, their own chat groups indulge in cyberbullying and even if they do, how to position the situation as something that crosses the line from being entertaining to being abusive. Other common forms of cyberbullying mentioned are sharing of others' private information and "outing" or posting jokes about or pictures of the victim in private profiles or chat groups. Just as with other forms of violence, different stereotypes and strategies of normalization and blame attribution are applied to make sense of the situation. These strategies are somewhat different from those often applied in cases of, for example, domestic violence, but generally follow the same patterns. Whereas in the case of domestic violence it can be legitimised by the victim not living up to characteristics associated with traditional gender roles, in the second it is victim's fault of being different in physical or social way. While in the first case some might say the victim has provoked the perpetrator, in the case of student cyberbullying some might say being a victim helps to build character or that "its the internet, what did you expect". It is these types of beliefs that make it even more difficult for students to recognise the harmful effects of cyberbullying practices they witness and take part in on a regular basis.

Normalisation and lack of trust in adults

According to students, cyberbullying and bullying is not going to be significantly lessened or fully eradicated and will always be a part of the experience of growing up. This perspective has various effects. First, it contributes to the normalization of violent practices by implying even if the practices should be condemned, they still are a normal (in the sense of being common) part of everyday life. This assumption in turn assumes this is clearly not an

emergency (a socially unacceptable issue), but rather something that can or should be ignored or tackled by the individual as other common problems are. Second, students report that this perspective is one of the strategies they exercise to distance themselves from either being or helping the victim. Although one of the reasons students often mention for not helping the victim is not to get hurt themselves, data shows cases where students would want to seek help they are not confident in their knowledge of where to find it, neither do they necessarily believe the help is going to be effective. Most students mention they would go to their teacher, parent or friend, but a criterion they often mention for choosing this person is how effective they assume the intervention of this person to be. Some of the students report the situation is solved or made more bearable by a teacher or a parent stepping in, but this is not the case for the majority of interviewed students. Others report the situation did not change and, in some cases, even got worse when an adult tried to intervene. This possibility alone, regardless of its likelihood is a real reason why students choose not to report cases of cyberbullying.

Proficiency in jargon, lack of actionable knowledge

Students are quite confident in offering explanations of why bullying happens and what might be the motivation of the person who is doing the bullying; students often mention this happens because of aggressor's insecurities or trauma thus even empathising with the bully. At first, this might suggest students understand some of the psychological dynamics of the cyberbullying situation and thus knowledge of what strategies will be the most effective to stop it. Similarly, this also might suggest students recognise the cause of cyberbullying is the bully, but perhaps because students share the belief cyberbullying will not cease, many of student suggestions for solving a particular situation are directed at victims. Although students also mention the victim might try to understand the bully or confront him/her, when talking of strategies students generally offer a broad suggestion of notifying a person of trust (mostly an adult). Students do not describe any particular methods or action plans nor do they describe variation to when which strategy should be used. Students admit seeking help is a challenge and it is often delayed until the situation has escalated. It is possible to conclude that despite being able to reproduce parts of the institutional narrative on cyberbullying students do not have a "set of tools" to apply when cyberbullying must be stopped. It should be added that students also apply strategies not directly related to ending cyberbullying, but rather oriented towards distractions from the issue. These include not using social media, "waiting it out", "not taking it seriously" and voicing support for the victim privately. Despite their belief that

cyberbullying will continue to exist, students suggest the problem in general should be tackled by sustaining or increasing public discussion about it.

Terminology as a tool

Students do not agree on whether the term cyberbullying is adequate for addressing the practices it tries to address. Students as a group also do not propose an alternative term. As for other terms different forms of words “hate” (heits) and “to bully” (bulijot) are used frequently in the interviews. The notion of hate, however, includes comments that are seen as broader than cyberbullying and is not necessarily limited in regard to the effects on the person to whom it is addressed. Overall, students lack vocabulary to precisely address the actions and practices they think might border on being violent or hurtful. While this is not a major problem when communicating these ideas to each other or during interviews, if cyberbullying is to be seriously addressed as an issue on social, structural and policy level, clear definitions of actors and actions will be crucial and necessary. These, however, need to be well contextualized with students’ own views and practices of using the internet by their own participation in the process.

Summing up student perspectives on cyberbullying

Overall students condemn violence, but mostly do not see cyberviolence and cyberbullying as something they are taking part in doing or should be responsible for ending. Students share stories of getting involved in trying to solve episodes of bullying but this is understood as “the right thing to do” on their part, similarly as not getting involved is rationalised by contemplating personal risk or helplessness when facing a systemic phenomenon.

- 1) Students do not believe cyberbullying as a phenomenon can be prevented or ended
- 2) When faced with cyberbullying students individualise it, they do not essentially see it as a social problem
- 3) Students are aware of general cybersafety issues, rate their internet proficiency as high and know they can and should seek help in cases of cyberbullying. At the same time they are not sure when and how to seek help
- 4) Students are aware of general strategies of seeking help, but evaluate them in terms of effectiveness. Students do not seek help when they believe that seeking help might not be effective or make their situation worse
- 5) Students normalise cyberbullying, some think it is also normalised by adults

- 6) Students do not link their posting and commenting to issues of cyberbullying and cybersafety

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