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### SOCIAL DISCOURSE ON CYBERBULLYING IN THE DIGITAL PRESS:

AN ANALYSIS FOR SOCIAL  
INTERVENTION PROFESSIONALS

EL DISCURSO SOCIAL SOBRE  
EL CIBERACOSO EN LA PRENSA DIGITAL:  
UN ANÁLISIS PARA PROFESIONALES DE LA  
INTERVENCIÓN SOCIAL

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## ABSTRACT

Given the influence of the mass media on constructing realities and opinions, we investigated how the phenomenon of cyberbullying is presented in the digital versions of the high-profile newspapers El País and El Mundo.

A qualitative method was used. In the first stage, thematic analysis was applied to the textual content of the selected news items. Three themes were obtained: 1: Metamorphosis of school bullying: the emergence of cyberbullying; 2: Patriarchy in cyberbullying: gender issues; and 3: The COVID-19 pandemic: a breeding ground for cyberbullying. In the second stage, discursive analysis was conducted to study in further depth the interconnected contents found in the three themes. The following IR was obtained: An incipient prevention-intervention approach against cyberbullying.

The results suggest that there is a pressing need to plan and implement systematic and well-coordinated measures. To do so, special emphasis must be placed on sensitizing society in general and social intervention professionals in particular to these new ways of exercising violence such that they support and contribute socially to this initiative. As part of their political agendas, all the institutions involved should prioritize the struggle against the current scourge of cyberbullying.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Cyberbullying; qualitative method; COVID-19; Social Work; digital press.*

## RESUMEN

Dada la influencia de los medios de comunicación en la construcción de realidades y opiniones, se investigó cómo se presenta el fenómeno del ciberacoso en las versiones digitales de los diarios El País y El Mundo.

Se empleó un método cualitativo. En una primera fase, se aplicó el análisis temático del contenido textual de las noticias seleccionadas. Se obtuvieron tres bloques temáticos: 1: Metamorfosis del acoso escolar: surgimiento del ciberacoso; 2: El patriarcado en el ciberacoso: cuestiones de género; y 3: La pandemia del COVID-19: caldo de cultivo del ciberacoso. En la segunda etapa, se realizó un análisis discursivo para profundizar en los contenidos interconectados hallados en los tres bloques temáticos. Se obtuvo el RI: Un incipiente enfoque de prevención-intervención contra el ciberacoso.

Los resultados sugieren que existe una necesidad apremiante de planificar y aplicar medidas sistemáticas y bien coordinadas. Para ello, se debe hacer especial hincapié en sensibilizar a la sociedad en general, y a los profesionales de la intervención social en particular, sobre estas nuevas formas de ejercer la violencia, de manera que apoyen y contribuyan socialmente a esta iniciativa. Todas las instituciones implicadas deberían priorizar en sus agendas políticas la lucha contra la actual lacra del ciberacoso.

## KEYWORDS

*Ciberacoso; método cualitativo; COVID-19; trabajo social; prensa digital.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Technosocial development has led to the emergence of digital natives while virtualizing part of the real world and its social phenomena (Sánchez et al., 2022). In this setting, there has been a recent and marked increase in the use of the Internet and virtual social media by children and adolescents, which is influencing almost all aspects of their daily lives (Martin-Criado et al., 2021; Tajahuerce et al., 2018; Williford and DePaolis, 2019).

Technology has provided young people with a set of very positive aspects: access to information and the development of social and emotional competencies, among others. However, the potential risks associated with the accessibility of electronic media and its mastery should not be overlooked. These risks include cyberbullying, which is the social problem addressed in this study (Agatston and Limber, 2018; Lu et al., 2022; Polo et al., 2014). Certain features of online communication, such as permanent accessibility or lack of emotional reactivity, make misbehaviour more likely to occur (Kowalski et al., 2014).

In the light of this situation, and as a reflection of technological development, traditional school bullying has spread into the virtual environment (Feijóo et al., 2021). The proliferation of cyberbullying has aroused great interest among psychosocial intervention professionals, teachers, and researchers (Cuesta et al., 2018; Donoso et al., 2019; González and Prendes, 2018; Martínez-Ferrer et al., 2021).

It should be noted that school bullying and cyberbullying are related (Chan and Wong, 2019; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Tajahuerce et al., 2018). Recently, Olweus and Limber have suggested that cyberbullying should be considered to be a subcategory or a specific form of traditional school bullying (Olweus and Limber, 2018). Other researchers have suggested that cyberbullying may be considered a form of "indirect traditional bullying" (Slovak and Singer, 2011). Kowalski et al. (2014) highlight the overlap between involvement in cyberbullying and traditional bullying, noting that many aggressors and victims of cyberbullying are also those involved in traditional bullying (Williford and DePaolis, 2019). Social Work is a discipline that attempts to understand the risks linked to human behaviour, different relationships, and people's well-being. Thus, bullying and cyberbullying are useful social diagnostic factors with valuable implications for social interventions (Willoughby, 2019).

Although bullying and cyberbullying share the basic elements of peer mistreatment, the aspects specific to each of them should be analysed because they determine the effects of each of these types of behaviour (Avilés, 2013; Barlett and Gentile, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2019; Polo et al., 2014). Such an approach is fundamental to effective and efficient practice by social professionals (e.g., social workers, social psychologists).

Until recently, bullying has been characterized as a hidden phenomenon, understood as something private, practically unavoidable, and tolerated without further engagement in its more subtle manifestations (Muñoz, 2016; Domínguez and Millán-Franco, 2021). This type of aggression is considered to be cyberbullying when it occurs in the setting of information and communication technologies (Agatston and Limber, 2018; Arrieta-López et al., 2019; Brochado et al. 2017; Chaves-Alvarez et al., 2020; Martin-Criado et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Rivas et al.

2022). It should be noted that definitions of cyberbullying are to a great extent based on those of traditional bullying (Agatston and Limber, 2018), given the close association between them.

Nevertheless, cyberbullying itself should be the subject of deeper investigation in order to develop effective interventions. Kowalski et al. (2019) and Agatston and Limber (2018) have suggested that risk factors for cyberbullying and protective factors against it occur in several domains: individual, family, peer, school, and community. Risk factors for and protective factors against victimization include technology use, experiences with traditional bullying, age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, weight status, socioeconomic status, personality, beliefs, behaviour, support from peers, parental warmth, and a positive school environment.

This perspective emerged during the chronological development of research on cyberbullying. Although pioneering studies were mainly based on comparisons between traditional school bullying and cyberbullying in terms of prevalence (Herrera-López et al., 2018), a new trend is currently emerging. According to Lucas-Molina et al. (2022), currently, the main focus is to identify the factors that protect students from the negative impact of cyberbullying.

However, research on cyberbullying has generally ignored the gender perspective and has exclusively focused on the problem of bullying among young people in general. However, cyberbullying reproduces the same gender stereotypes present in physical space. Several authors have highlighted the need to include the gender perspective in interventions against cyberbullying in order to break gender stereotypes (e.g., the masculine-aggression association) and, ultimately, reinforce its effectiveness (Cardozo et al., 2017). Tajahuerce et al. (2018) have noted that research and public policies on cyberbullying are traditionally developed taking the masculine as a normalized frame of reference. However, such gender blindness in the approach to cyberbullying seems to be at least partly diminishing because of the prevailing reality.

According to Kowalski et al. (2014), the media through which cyberbullying can occur are diverse: online games, instant messaging, and social media or digital image sites, among others (McInroy and Mishna, 2017). Garaigordobil (2014) has suggested that there are many types of this form of violence. These types include the following: posting a video of a physical attack on the network (happy slapping); leaving offensive comments on forums, websites, or chats while posing as the victim (Polo et al., 2014); excluding people from specific social networks; registering peoples' email addresses on certain sites so they are spammed; creating fake profiles or spaces in the name of victims (Slovak and Singer, 2011); posting compromising images or sensitive data about victims on the Internet (Agatston and Limber, 2018; Chan and Wong, 2019); sending threatening messages by email, SMS, or WhatsApp to victims (Kowalski et al., 2014); or usurping their email password. Thus, cyberbullying can lead to extreme situations such as death threats and sexual harassment (Chan and Wong, 2019).

Much work remains to be conducted on this issue despite the fact that studies conducted to date have provided valuable and needed information on bullying in terms of its characteristics, typologies, and risk and protection factors. In the last decade, both bullying and cyberbullying have led to growing concern worldwide (Agatston and Limber, 2018; Chan and Wong, 2019; McInroy and Mishna, 2017). In fact, this type of virtual violence has recently increased as a consequence of the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has led to new challenges in very diverse domains (e.g., increases in family conflicts, the transition to online

classes) leading to decreases in the well-being of children and adolescents (Rodríguez-Rivas et al. 2022). Quarantines have exponentially increased the amount of time children and adolescents spend in front of the screen, which has increased the risk of their being cyberbullied (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO and the French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020). According to Zakuan and Saian (2022), COVID-19 has affected the learning of billions of students worldwide. This situation has encouraged not only the use of online educational platforms, but also the use of social media and online games, which has led to an increase in online violence worldwide (Pfetsch et al., 2022; Pulido-Montes and Ancheta-Arrabal, 2021; Schunk et al., 2022).

By exposing serious events such as suicides, the media has increased awareness of the importance of human rights and the prevention of and intervention against bullying and cyberbullying (Garaigordobil, 2011; Rizo and Picornell, 2016). In addition, increased attention by the popular media to cases of cyberbullying is also boosting national and international research (Lee et al. 2017). However, UNESCO (2019) continues to emphasize that there are still many countries in which studies on cyberbullying are scarce and that even fewer countries have teacher training on online safety, prevention, and the reporting of cyberbullying. The emerging field of cyberbullying in its different facets is still at a relatively early stage, and conceptual, methodological, and empirical research on this topic needs to be strengthened (Kowalski et al., 2019; Olweus and Limber, 2018).

Although there have been recent advances in studies on bullying, especially in quantitative research and its descriptive aspect, qualitative studies remain nascent on the social imaginary and, specifically, on the social construction of cyberbullying by the mass media. Our research interest in this topic has emerged from current interest in the media in developing awareness about cyberbullying, generating better attitudes, instilling improved behaviour in individuals and, to a certain extent, identifying the collective imaginary about specific social phenomena. This study fills a gap in research cited in intervention programs and public policies on cyberbullying, and particularly addresses the factors associated with the socio-political and cultural setting of cyberbullying.

Thus, in order to define and explain the social construction of cyberbullying and to understand the how and why of the phenomenon, we used a qualitative approach to study the relevance of social media, especially the online press, in the dissemination of knowledge about cyberbullying.

## 2. DESIGN AND METHOD

The study material comprised 32 newspaper articles published during 2020, 2021, and the first month of 2022. The texts were extracted from the newspapers El País (22 texts) and El Mundo (10 texts). The material was located and selected by specific searches of their online versions. The media search attempted to cover several inclusive semantic categories by using the most common terms used in Spanish to refer to cyberbullying: *ciberacoso* (Spanish rendering of cyberbullying), *cyberbullying*, *acoso por internet* (internet bullying), and *acoso digital* (digital bullying). We discarded publications that did not address the specific phenomenon of cyberbullying, such as those that referred exclusively to bullying in general or traditional school bullying.

A purposive sampling approach was used to choose the texts to be analysed. We initially screened all the articles and subsequently selected texts that explicitly mentioned the four semantic categories.

Although all the texts attempt to illustrate the social reality of cyberbullying, 18 of them specifically address the emergence of the phenomenon, the descriptor factors, and the need for effective prevention and intervention. The 32 texts comprised opinion articles (8) and news articles (24). The 24 current news articles referred to academic or professional sources, such as the opinion of specialists on issues related to technologies and school bullying, the presentation of empirical studies to the media, or the publication of court rulings.

Inclusion criteria were as follows: the homogeneity of the general theme; and the heterogeneity of the content addressed in each text. The homogeneity criterion was fulfilled if the texts addressed the chosen semantic categories. The heterogeneity criterion demonstrated the great diversity of this type of violence. More specifically, the inclusion criterion was that the texts should deal with the what, why, and how of cyberbullying, Internet bullying, and digital bullying. We also tried to ensure that most of the texts referred to national news, were current or recent (2020, 2021, and 2022), were written in Spanish, and appeared in the digital versions of the two high-profile Spanish newspapers *El País* and *El Mundo*. The exclusion criteria were failing to meet the latter requirements: that is, that they referred to non-Spanish contexts; that they were written in languages other than Spanish and published in unreliable digital media; and that they were obsolete, fake news, or local or regional in their scope.

### 3. FIELDWORK AND DATA ANALYSIS

The main objective of this study was to determine how the Spanish digital press socially constructs the phenomenon of cyberbullying. With this aim, we used two Spanish national newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, and applied a qualitative phenomenological approach. In the first stage, we conducted thematic analysis of the newspaper texts, and in the second stage, we conducted discursive analysis to investigate the initial results in further detail (Íñiguez, 2006).

Firstly, thematic analysis was applied to structure the information collected and produced during this stage of the research process. We applied the following procedure: Reading the title of the news item; selecting the news item; in-depth reading of the selected news items; identifying relevant aspects; identifying recurrent themes; and classifying based on the thematic lines detected. This analysis established units of meaning based on a careful reading of the newspaper texts used. As a result, a series of common patterns were obtained, which were called "themes". These themes are those shared lines of argument used in the texts to answer the question "what" in relation to defining and explaining the study topic (Braun and Clarke, 2012). During this stage, we eliminated articles referring to traditional bullying (i.e., those that did not explicitly specify the term cyberbullying). However, we included articles that addressed differences between cyberbullying and bullying or school bullying, or that understood cyberbullying as an emerging subcategory of bullying.

Secondly, we applied discourse analysis, which mainly focused on determining the constructive aspects of language in social interaction (Van Dijk, 2001). We understand discourse as a set of linguistic practices that maintain and promote certain social relationships (Íñiguez, 2006).

For this purpose, interpretative repertoire (IR) was used as the analytical tool. Interpretative repertoire is understood as that socially shared resource to construct contextualized discursive productions. Specifically, IR is a means to understand not only the content of discursive productions (i.e., what is described by a particular discourse), but also how it is organized. Thus, IR is a discursive framework in which speakers—in this case the texts employed—construct and make sense of their reality through metaphors or tropes (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

At this stage, analyses were conducted using Atlas.ti version 9.0 software. The process was divided into two stages that were not necessarily sequential: the textual level and the conceptual level. In the first stage (textual level), the software was used to facilitate the identification of text segments (quotations) in order to generate the codes later used to identify the initial themes. In the second stage (conceptual level), it was used to establish relationships between codes in order to identify the IR linked to the themes.

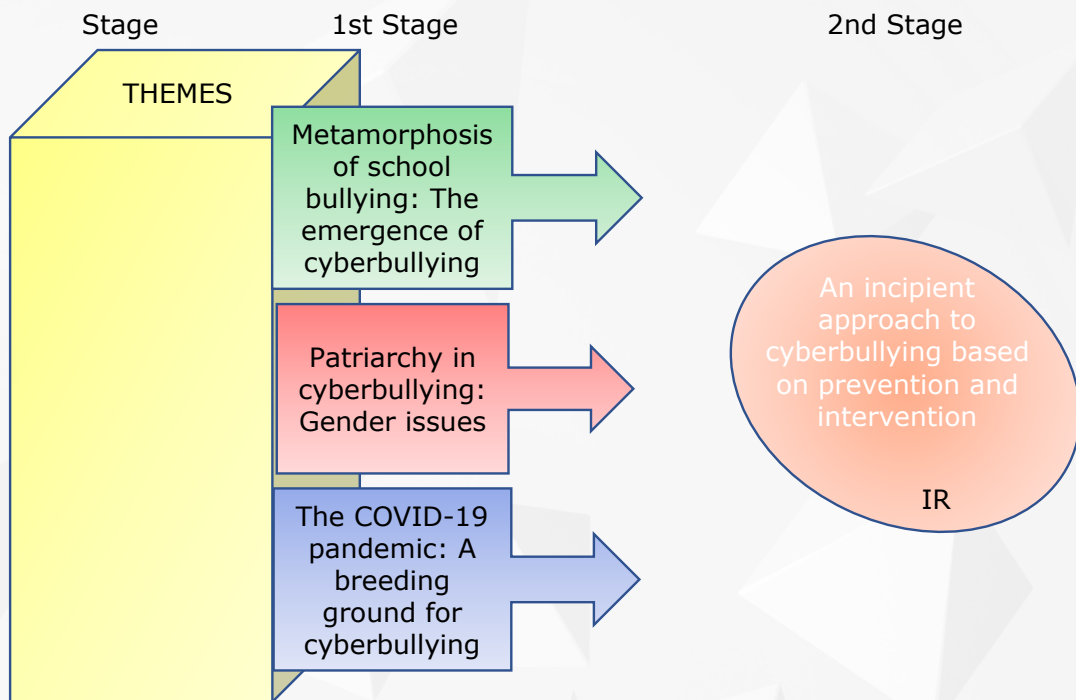
As a result, the researchers and experts produced a consensus report that explained the common themes as well as the distinctive IR that aided in conceptualizing the purpose of the three resulting themes. Therefore, symbolic interactionism was considered to be the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study, given that the study aim was to understand cyberbullying and its social construction using data extracted from the digital versions of two high-profile Spanish newspapers. In this sense, the meaning offered by the media on the social reality of cyberbullying is a product of the way in which the texts explain and describe the facts according to the available meanings and how each situation is defined at a social and cultural level (Pedraz et al., 2014; Ruiz, 2012).

## 4. RESULTS

Three main themes were detected in the analysed material. Together they help to describe what is understood by cyberbullying and what factors influence cyberbullying. In the first stage (thematic analysis), we used discursive categories to identify and understand the specific details of the study topic. The following discursive strategies stand out: differences and similarities between cyberbullying and school bullying; gender issues; and COVID-19 as a factor in the emergence of this type of violence. The three themes identified were designated as follows: Theme 1: "Metamorphosis of school bullying: the emergence of cyberbullying"; Theme 2: "Patriarchy in cyberbullying: gender issues"; and Theme 3: "The COVID-19 pandemic: a breeding ground for cyberbullying".

Within each theme, different discursive categories were identified that in a sense revealed new options and ways to construct and understand this type of violence. These options mainly attempt to understand its prevention and, therefore, social and community intervention in this phenomenon. It was decided that these issues were worth exploring in more depth. Discursive analysis was conducted to answer how and why these themes play a role in the social construction of the cyberbullying phenomenon. As a result, the following IR was identified: An incipient prevention/intervention approach to cyberbullying.

Figure 1 depicts the themes obtained and the IR that describes a new form of action against this type of violence.

**Figure 1: Themes and interpretive repertoire (2022).**

## THEME 1: METAMORPHOSIS OF SCHOOL BULLYING: THE EMERGENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

This first theme illustrates the different lines of argument that the two media sources use to define and explain what is meant by cyberbullying. These lines of argument both clarify the main elements that help to characterize cyberbullying as well as describe the various forms of this type of harassment, the virtual settings in which it develops, and the agents involved in the victim-bully-spectator triad. In each of these lines of argument, the differences between cyberbullying and school bullying and their interrelation are shown.

### A) The elements that help to characterize cyberbullying

As Kowalski et al. (2019) have pointed out, traditional bullying and cyberbullying focus on similar aspects and events. In fact, the definitions of cyberbullying are mainly based on the definitions of bullying (Agatston and Limber, 2018). Thus, the texts often refer to cyberbullying as a specific type of bullying. Adolescents involved in bullying are quite likely to be involved in cyberbullying situations.

*Extract 1: Bullying has increased in the last decade and now counts with the worrying addition of cyberbullying, which follows you wherever you go (the bullied child was saved by holidays in the past, but not now). (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 2: Bullying is not something new. It has simply changed its settings and is now on the Internet... (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

The analysed material makes the point that "although cyberbullying and school bullying are not the same type of violence, they are closely connected". Thus, many online incidents have the potential to create disruption in school and interfere with the targeted student's ability to participate



in educational programs (Willard, 2007). In fact, the texts analysed state that "Bullying doesn't arise because children are on the Internet, so blaming the new technologies would be a mistake. We have to educate them within the family, in the schools, and in offline and online settings".

In general, it has been shown that despite the challenge of conceptualizing and delimiting cyberbullying as an emerging phenomenon, we have to identify its similarities to traditional bullying as well as the specifics that make it a new type of violence. Some of the aspects shared between cyberbullying and bullying are the power imbalance between the victim and the aggressor (a dominance-submission pattern), the aggressiveness of the behaviour, and the ongoing aggression over time.

*Extract 3: Cyberbullying can be fatal to anyone, but it is even worse for the most vulnerable, such as adolescents and women, especially if they have been sexually abused. (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 4: Legal decisions are taken on the basis of whether it is done repeatedly... (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

Although the online power imbalance described in the texts refers to aspects such as the difference in knowledge between the aggressor and the victim, their social status, or the relative anonymity of the aggressor, in many cases the anonymity of the aggressor is the factor that damages the coexistence of young people.

*Extract 5: In one decade, bullying has become cyberbullying. And now it chases the tormented adolescent from all sides, allowing the bullies to take refuge, if they so wish, in a comfortable and insidious anonymity that, in many instances, can become deadly. (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 6: Traditional bullying used to occur at school and the adolescents could find some refuge at home or in another environment. Now, however, the harassment can continue at home or anywhere through the computer or phone. There is another big difference: the anonymity that the Net can give the perpetrator. Anyone can create a fake e-mail or a web profile to harass someone, without the victim of these attacks knowing who is actually carrying out the attack, which is very disorienting for the victim. (El País, El Mundo, 2020-2021).*

## **B) The virtual contexts: The victim-bully-spectator triad**

The massive use of electronic devices and the Internet makes this type of peer aggression unique and different from offline violence. Some specifics stand out in cyberbullying: "dehumanizing power, speed, and convenience while executing the aggression, strong public dissemination, and permanent invasion of the victim". Cyberbullying redefines the sphere of privacy and anonymity, which confer the aggressors with greater control power.

*Extract 7: Cyberbullying has a dehumanizing power that was isolated in the setting of school bullying, whereas far more people can join in on cyberbullying or they don't empathize with the victim. It's easier to see everyone pointing the finger at a child who is crying when someone is publicly ill-treating them on social media rather than in the schoolyard. And the latter has been disrupted. (El País, El Mundo 2020-2021).*

It has also been noted that, in this type of violence, the protagonists often have a multifaceted relationship. In other words, there is a continuous exchange of roles between the people involved in violent online acts. As Chapin and Coleman (2017) pointed out, victims and viewers also frequently engage in cyberbullying due to the cycle of perceptions and behaviour generated by those involved in this type of violence. Likewise, news reports show that "the most common online figure of cyberbullying is the shared figure, the so-called bully-victims".

Cyberbullying is becoming increasingly common due to massive digitalization. This is of particular concern, since cyberbullying is perpetuated by the nature of the cyberspace itself: anonymity; the persistence of digital contents; the ease by which power imbalance can be achieved due to anonymity; and the rapid spread of content.

Some articles in the written press show that the unique characteristics of cyberbullying require the creation of expert bodies, new laws, and new ways to prevent and intervene in this area.

*Extract 8: It is essential to provide as many technical and personal means as necessary to make society as a whole aware of the enormous need to become educated in respect for diversity, equality, and the freedom of all people, whoever they are, according to the universally recognised principles of respect and coexistence. (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 9: Tabarés and other digital activists believe that these measures are worthwhile, but they also note the lack of a body outside of the platforms that could regulate the problem. (El País, 2020-2022).*

## THEME 2: PATRIARCHY IN CYBERBULLYING: GENDER ISSUES

### A) The gender perspective

Theme 2 is based on discursive strategies that refer to gender-related issues. The texts used in the analysis point out that "when talking about cyberbullying we also have to talk about gender". Thus, many of the texts specify that "women are the main victims of this type of violence".

*Extract 10: 2,143 cases were investigated concerning the spreading of intimate images without consent. Of these, 84% of the victims were women. (El País, 2020-2022).*

This example shows how the news media divide information about cyberbullying according to this category.

*Extract 11: Thus, 14.1% of young women between 14 and 20 years of age who have been interviewed felt pressured to perform sexual activities, almost half of them have received unrequested sexual photographs (48%) or have been asked for them (43.9%), and 23.4% have received requests for cybersex. (El País, 2020-2022).*

This gender issue has been characterized by an absence of scientific literature on the conceptualization of cyberbullying as well as a lack of social policies on intervention in cyberbullying. However, society as a whole has begun to be aware of this issue and make it visible.

Nevertheless, a minority view holds that what is relevant is not so much the identity of the aggressor or victim, but the basis for such behaviour.

*Extract 12: As victims of identity theft, "they had been suffering hell" in social media and websites in which their personal data and image were used, as well as those of other family members, "in a fraudulent, blatant manner and with the sole purpose of ridiculing and humiliating them". (El Mundo, El País, 2020-2022).*

However, a gender approach is needed to detect and recognize when cyberbullying among teenagers is targeting discrimination against girls. It is emphasized that "this should not be confused with individual problems of cyberbullying because the response must be different in both cases".

The media also report an increase in the number of cases of gender violence (male) between adolescent couples through the power of control provided by technologies over freedom of movement and communication. Thus, the digital press perceives cyberbullying itself as a form of exercising gender-based (male) violence among young people.

*Extract 13: From 2010 to 2013. Between these years, there was an increase in gender violence between adolescent couples following the emergence of social media, which transformed the way adolescents relate to each other and the way they exercise violence. However, from 2013 onward, there was a decrease in some attitudes towards girls, such as "controlling her through the mobile", "using her passwords to control her", and "using her passwords to impersonate her", despite the fact that the use of new technologies had increased. (El País, 2020-2022).*

## **B) The forms of presentation of cyberbullying in relation to gender**

In general, the cyberbullying of women consists of blackmail with sexual connotations, similar to the harassment that occurs in physical space. Women are threatened with the disclosure and spreading of content that devalues them and damages their reputation. The messages mainly allude to sexual objectification: discursive strategies are used that refer to sexual attributes and physical beauty.

*Extract 14: She received insults regarding her physique just for not being within the supposed canons of beauty... (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 15: Feeding these behaviours can lead them to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress... in the worst cases self-destructive practices such as extreme dieting or impulsive physical exercise. (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 16: Cyberbullying was increasing and increased even more with the pandemic. It was also linked to sexting (i.e., the dissemination of images of the victim with sexual content). (El País, 2020-2022).*

We have observed that one of the most frequently used mechanisms to exercise cyberbullying is blackmailing via the distribution of sexual images that, above all, humiliate and marginalize women. This new virtual space reproduces the patterns of a society still rooted in a patriarchal system displaying heterosexist sexual paradigms.

*Extract 17: Machismo is culture, not behaviour. Hatred in discourse on social media or chats like Twitch feeds a historical misogynistic hatred. They see you as more of a man by behaving that way. In the end they always harass, mistreat, and murder women. (El País, El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

Discursive categories that refer not only to women's appearance, but also to their intelligence and sexual preferences are recurrent.

*Extract 18: "The girl, 20 years old, was a victim of identity theft on social media and her personal image was humiliated and ridiculed". (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 19: Violence against women in social media is typically characterized by the lack of rationale and being dismissive via gender. Such hatred is typically expressed through sexual references: "bitch", "frigid", "fag hag", "dyke", "harpy", "useless"... (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 20: This feedback affected her self-esteem and self-image. "She would tell me that she hated her legs, that she looked fat; she would eat everything or suddenly stop eating. Instagram undermined her morale". (El País, 2020-2022).*

Most news stories that make reference to gender compare cyberbullying and traditional school bullying. Bullying behaviour is separated by gender, attributing "direct" aggressive behaviours to boys (disruptive behaviour), and "indirect" or "relational" aggressiveness to girls (i.e., fostering isolation from the group and undermining reputation) (Navarro, 2016). Based on this view, it has been taken for granted that cyberbullying is "a girl thing", despite there being "insufficient evidence to support this assumption".

### **THEME 3: COVID-19: A BREEDING GROUND FOR CYBERBULLYING**

#### **A) Covid-19 side-effects in the virtual world**

The COVID-19 crisis has had many collateral effects on society. In fact, the control and mitigation measures implemented during this health crisis gave rise to new social scenarios: compulsory social isolation, increased virtual interaction, and the massive and problematic use of the Internet and social media. Regardless of the current respite of the COVID-19 pandemic, the consequences of these new scenarios are here to stay.

*Extract 21: It has been estimated that more than 600,000 ESO [i.e., Spanish secondary education] students may be involved in the problematic use of the Internet and social media (33%), which is detrimental to their emotional well-being... it has been defined as "a public health problem". (El País, 2020-2022).*

Thus, the closure of educational centres and the new developments in leisure and educational activities have encouraged massive engagement in the digital world. As a result, the use of technological tools has increased and, therefore, the risks associated with their misuse. This misuse is partially due a lack of knowledge on the part of parents and other stakeholders and on the lack of control when surfing the Internet.

*Extract 22: The lack of resources and teacher training are the biggest obstacles to dealing with the cases of bullying that, along with the pandemic, have increased via digital devices. (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 23: The increase in the use of digital devices caused by the pandemic has also meant that whereas in 2020 there were fewer cases of face-to-face bullying, there was*

*an increase in cases of cyberbullying, a threat that has been echoed by the Spanish Public Prosecutor Office itself in a 2020 report. (El País, 2020-2022).*

Thus, the reports from the Spanish press analysed show that, during the pandemic, Spain has seen a decrease in cases of traditional school bullying, while it has seen the increasing emergence of cyberbullying.

*Extract 24: Representatives of civil society organizations warn of an increase in these offences during the health crisis in which more than 80% of the victims are women. (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 25: Bullying is not something new. It has simply changed settings and is now on the Internet. During the pandemic, our children began to face a new reality outside the classroom and bullying moved from schools to mobiles, tablets, and computers. (El Mundo, El País, 2020-2022).*

Therefore, cyberbullying has been the form of intimidation most frequent during the pandemic. It has mainly been exerted through various digital platforms and social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and video games.

*Extract 26: The increased use of digital devices has also led to a considerable growth in cyberbullying on platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram or TikTok, to the point of accounting for 22.6% (compared to 0.2% in 2018-2019) of aggressions that can originate from other young people and adults, through crimes such as child grooming (gaining the child's trust with the ultimate aim of intimidating them and obtaining a sexual favour). This phenomenon is so concerning and dangerous that even the Public Prosecutor Office issued a warning in its 2020 report. (El País, 2020-2022).*

## **B) Cyberbullying is "a public health problem for society"**

Driven by the pandemic, cyberbullying in any of its forms is labelled as "a public health problem for society". This is why the effects associated with the pandemic are risk factors for increased victimization due to this type of violence: "We have been seeing the effects of experiencing this victimization for a long time and there is concern about suicidal ideation".

*Extract 27: The pandemic has been a breeding ground in which bullying can manifest in other ways. The pandemic and the new technologies have created new forms of bullying... (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 28: Cyberbullying has been the most common form of bullying during the pandemic. (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

The data reviewed suggest that—during the pandemic—confinement, social isolation, and online education led students to spend more time on electronic devices, and some of them have been and continue to be involved in cyberbullying as aggressors, victims, or both.

This situation calls for effective strategies to address this type of virtual aggression in society. Administrative bodies, the legal system, and the professionals involved in the prevention and intervention of social problems should play key roles, as reflected in the IR described in the following section.

In all three themes we identified discursive elements related to prevention and intervention in cyberbullying. We decided to analyse and explore in more depth the role played by recurrent discursive elements, such as social and emotional costs, social policies, the existence or otherwise of laws on the issue, and ways to manage prevention and intervention in relation to its similarities to and differences from other forms of violence. To this end, we conducted discourse analysis (Potter and Whethell, 1987) and, using IR as an analytical tool, we explored the ways in which different ideas on how to act in these cases are negotiated and maintained. The IR identified in the material was named as follows: An incipient prevention-intervention approach to cyberbullying.

### **THE INTERPRETIVE REPERTOIRE: AN INCIPIENT PREVENTION-INTERVENTION APPROACH TO CYBERBULLYING**

This IR was identified in the analysed articles as an explanatory pattern explicitly linked to prevention and intervention in cyberbullying. Discursive patterns referring to the lack of social policies, mechanisms, and competent bodies for the prevention of and intervention in cyberbullying were frequent.

*Extract 29: Violence against homosexual people, women, or disabled people on the Internet raises the question of whether there are legal instruments to deal with the phenomenon. (El País, 2020-2022).*

This extract highlights the lack of knowledge and ineffectiveness of organizations, administrations, and professionals in formulating laws, social and educational policies aimed at preventing this type of mistreatment, as well as a lack of oversight concerning the correct implementation of current measures.

*Extract 30: The protection of children and adolescents requires a great deal of prevention and educational work in all areas of training, from bullying and cyberbullying to the values of equality, respect, and affective sexual development, a chapter that in Spain continues to raise absurd ideological resistance. (El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

If we want to succeed in the prevention of bullying and cyberbullying in the educational setting, such policies have to be clear and well defined (Agatston and Limber, 2018). It is also necessary to "strengthen the legal system to improve prevention and intervention against cyberbullying".

In line with the work of Zakuan and Saian (2022), the extracts highlight the pressing need to implement legal measures in the fight against cyberbullying: thus, poor legislation should be globally improved and developed.

*Extract 31: We believe that neither the law-enforcing bodies nor the judicial system were fast enough to clarify the facts and identify the person (or persons) responsible for the behaviour that has caused such a dramatic outcome for the young woman who could not bear all the suffering caused by the scorn and public exposure. (El País, 2020-2022).*

*Extract 32: There is a bittersweet feeling due to the frustration of not gaining justice and regarding the question of how many more women will continue to be victims of deceit and threats in social media. (El País, 2020-2022).*

Likewise, the extracts appeal to the need for an integrated educational approach that focuses on eradicating societal dominance-submission models, given that these form the basis of the emergence of peer-to-peer violence. Therefore, there is a need for a new rights and obligation model adapted to the changes in society, while preserving the dominant traditional values, such as solidarity, commitment to others, respect, and honesty. In this sense "What should be done is to educate them both in values and respect as well as in digital issues, to set routines, and teach them to make good use of the Internet and social media".

*Extract 33: Why education in emotional intelligence and empathy is essential for day-to-day schooling. Both skills help prevent school bullying, cyberbullying, toxic relationships, and situations of mistreatment and abuse, among others. (El País, El Mundo, 2020-2022).*

The need to set up interdisciplinary work teams is revealed in the IR. In fact, it is shown how integrated collaboration between different professionals (e.g., psychologists, lawyers, social workers) should become the foundation of the fight to eradicate both traditional school bullying and cyberbullying. Regarding prevention: "The attempt has been made to transmit values education across all subjects, but it is not enough". Thus, peer mediation is proposed as a working tool: "A model that is increasingly being used (and in other communities such as Madrid) is Peer Mediation, which is very effective".

Similarly, the following extract draws attention to another aspect:

*Extract 34: There are also other methods of prevention and response in Spain, such as the AVE from the University of Alicante. This method implements zero tolerance and uses tools such as the sociogram, which can identify hidden victims of violence through a series of questions put to students. (El País, 2020-2022).*

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the view that the mass media has a strong influence on constructing realities and opinions, our study focused on identifying how the phenomenon of cyberbullying is presented in the digital versions of two high-profile newspapers: El País and El Mundo. Knowledge concerning the social construction of this phenomenon by the media may be of special interest to social workers as an aid in diagnosing the social reality in which they perform their roles in the prevention of and intervention in cyberbullying.

A qualitative method was used. In the first stage, at a descriptive level, we conducted a thematic analysis of the textual content of the selected news items. Three themes were obtained: 1: Metamorphosis of school bullying: the emergence of cyberbullying; 2: Patriarchy in cyberbullying: gender issues; and 3: The COVID-19 pandemic: a breeding ground for cyberbullying. In the second stage, we conducted discursive analysis as a way to study in further depth the interconnected contents found in the themes. The outcome was the IR that we entitled "An incipient prevention-intervention approach against cyberbullying".

We present the conclusions regarding each of the three themes in relation to the IR common to all three (i.e., "An incipient prevention-intervention approach against cyberbullying").

## 1: METAMORPHOSIS OF SCHOOL BULLYING: THE EMERGENCE OF CYBERBULLYING

As noted, bullying and cyberbullying are related (Chan and Wong, 2019; Tajahuerce et al., 2018). In fact, several studies have noted that a large proportion of students who experience cyberbullying also experience traditional bullying (Agatston and Limber, 2018; Lucas-Molina et al., 2022). Olweus and Limber suggested that cyberbullying could be considered to be a subcategory or a specific form of traditional school bullying (Olweus and Limber, 2018).

This study found that cyberbullying and school bullying share several characteristics: the aggressiveness of the behaviour; the power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim; and the continuity over time of the aggression. However, this type of aggression between peers differs from face-to-face violence in the following aspects: dehumanizing power, the speed and ease of executing the aggression, strong public diffusion, and permanent invasion of the victim. These are the distinctive features of this type of violence and should be taken into account when developing proposals for its prevention and intervention. We consider that the first step in the mitigation of cyberbullying should be to define the social problem, construct and differentiate it, and avoid equating it with other types of violence. Furthermore, this problem will not be eradicated unless appropriate measures are adopted and professionals are provided with the needed resources, especially digital resources, for its prevention, detection, and intervention.

Thus, and in relation to the IR, it would be relevant for social intervention professionals in their respective fields of action (social workers, educators, etc.) to have a professional online presence as a preventive option. This would allow observation, participation, interaction, and mediation among users. According to Willoughby (2019), social dynamics and conflicts between young people and adolescents are also generated within digital media. Therefore, the figure of the "digital professional" must be taken into consideration in order to know how and when to address the different realities that could cause violence. "Training in digital skills is already a priority in professional practice but must also play a relevant role in the training of future social workers and social welfare professionals" (Picornell-Lucas and López-Peláez, 2022, p. 36).

## 2: PATRIARCHY IN CYBERBULLYING: GENDER ISSUES

This theme describes how cyberbullying is not isolated from or unconnected to other types of violence. The texts analysed suggest that this phenomenon is not only related to school bullying, but also to gender-based violence. Therefore, adolescents should be educated and socialized from a gender perspective by reducing, especially among women, the fear and toleration of devaluation, discrimination, humiliation and, in short, violence in all its forms. But how can this be achieved? We believe that professionals (e.g., teachers, social workers, psychologists) should work on the basis of the term "positive empowered coexistence". This concept must be framed within a holistic development that exchanges the binary domination-submission model for one in which the priority axes are collective responsibility and respect for diversity. This approach would involve the implementation of a model centred on reciprocal rights and obligations. Strategies should be implemented and efforts made to promote the healthy cybercoexistence of young people by promoting an online society characterised by freedom as well as obligations (Sánchez et al., 2022).



From the societal and institutional perspective, the IR emphasises that a predominant socio-educational model should be promoted that is oriented to the formation of a citizenship in which the values of social justice, solidarity, and commitment are predominant in order to achieve a more egalitarian society in which inequality itself does not imply marginalization or intolerance.

Thus, the IR shows that prevention should be proposed and regulated from an interdisciplinary perspective in which initiatives and actions should be promoted to make progress in the elimination of the injustices, prejudices, stereotypes, and cultural myths that still underlie specific situations revealed by the results of this study. The texts used emphasize the lack of systematic institutional responses founded on the prevention and early detection of cyberbullying. Similar to the results of this study, those of Cardozo et al. (2017) specified the need to include the gender perspective in interventions against cyberbullying in order to break the stereotypes that have typified the foundations of a patriarchal society over a very long period. We must ensure the guarantees of protection of the new social realities and be able to identify situations in which human rights may be violated. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed not only education in values, but also on the development of tools to control the propagation of these stereotypes over the Internet.

### **3: CYBERBULLYING AS A BREEDING GROUND FOR COVID-19**

According to Paek et al. (2022), COVID-19 has generated unprecedented challenges that have severely affected young people in a setting in which their education and social life shifted to the virtual environment and, due to their prolonged isolation, exponentially increased their vulnerability. Zakuan and Saian (2022), for example, suggested that cases of cyberbullying have increased due to school closures and the greater use of the Internet and social media.

The pandemic quarantine has increased the amount of screen time among children and adolescents, which has increased the risk of cyberbullying (UNESCO and the French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020). Zakuan and Saian (2022) have stated that COVID-19 has affected the learning of billions of students worldwide and that this situation has encouraged not only the use of online educational platforms, but also social media and online games. As previously mentioned, the new situation has led to an increase in online violence and, in particular, cases of cyberbullying (Schunk et al., 2022). In this setting, the IR suggests that parents can play a key role in protecting children from victimization (Paek et al., 2022). We believe that if families foster the development of attitudes such as respect for others, empathy, and equality, then there will be a decreased risk of their children developing violent behaviour.

Researchers and social intervention agents in their role as digital professionals could inform, raise awareness, and promote workshops in which parents are taught how to use social media and mobile phones. This would help to reduce the parents' insecurities concerning the Internet, which should help them prevent their children being victimized. Users would be encouraged to develop and acquire protective skills regarding the critical, constructive, and responsible use of information and communication technologies, thus promoting "responsible digital citizenship".

During the development of this study, we reflected on new ways of working with online violence with the aim of integrating them into strategies, legislation, and social policies against cyberbullying. The planning and implementation of systematic and well-coordinated measures

is required. To do so, we first have to place special emphasis on raising awareness concerning these new forms of violence in society, including that of social intervention professionals, such that they support and contribute socially to the initiative. As part of their political agendas, all the institutions involved should prioritize the struggle against the current scourge of cyberbullying. Several agencies have emphasised the need to explicitly include cyberbullying in anti-bullying policies related to educational settings (Agatston and Limber, 2018).

According to Brochado et al. (2017), policies to prevent and intervene in cyberbullying should be firmly based on scientific evidence. In recent years, cyberbullying has received considerable attention in the media and among the public, but there is still a lack of adequate plans on prevention and intervention. Ongoing research is needed to be able to diagnose the problem and understand its main characteristics. If this phenomenon is not understood in depth, it will be difficult to find the appropriate solution.

This study used a purposive sampling approach, and so the results should be interpreted with caution in relation to other social settings. Nevertheless, the findings of this study should be of particular interest to researchers and social intervention professionals and in the design of policies against cyberbullying in different social settings (Domínguez and Millán-Franco, 2021). This study encourages ongoing reflections on this form of violence and renewed thinking on effective forms of intervention against this pressing social problem.

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