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Inner Conflicts of Those Involved in Cyberbullying – Between Taboo, Rejection, Ignorance and Tolerance

This paper addresses the individual perceptions and handling of cyberbullying from the perspective of young victims, perpetrators and bystanders. It examines the extent to which cyberbullying tends to be ignored, tolerated, rejected, actively addressed or justified and neutralised by those involved. This is based on empirical data taken from 40 qualitative interviews with adolescents aged thirteen to seventeen. The explorative examination was based on grounded theory. The data demonstrate differences and commonalities in the perceptions of cyberbullying among juveniles as well as the adolescents' strategies for dealing and coping with the phenomenon. This highlights the inner conflicts of different kinds of actors and their strategies to address or even overcome them. Overall, the findings indicate that it is necessary to consider the individual perceptions of people involved in cyberbullying in order to understand their ways of dealing with it.

Keywords: bystander, cyberbullying, inner conflicts, juveniles, perception, perpetrators, taboo, victims

Zwiespalte der Beteiligten bei Cybermobbing – Zwischen Tabuisierung, Ablehnung, Ignorieren und Toleranz

Dieser Beitrag befasst sich mit der individuellen Wahrnehmung und dem Umgang mit Cybermobbing aus der Perspektive von jugendlichen Opfern, Tätern und Bystandern. Dabei geht es um die Frage, inwieweit Cybermobbing von den Beteiligten eher ignoriert und toleriert, abgelehnt und aktiv angegangen oder gerechtfertigt und neutralisiert wird. Grundlage sind die empirischen Daten von 40 qualitativen Interviews mit Jugendlichen im Alter von 13 bis 17 Jahren. Die explorative Untersuchung wurde auf der Grundlage der Grounded Theory durchgeführt. Die Daten zeigen die Unterschiede und Gemeinsamkeiten in der Wahrnehmung, dem Umgang und der Bewältigung von Cybermobbing bei den betroffenen Jugendlichen. Dies verdeutlicht die inneren Konflikte der verschiedenen Akteure und ihre Strategien, diese anzugehen oder gar zu überwinden. Insgesamt deuten die Ergebnisse darauf hin, dass es notwendig ist, die individuellen Wahrnehmungen der von Cybermobbing betroffenen Personen zu berücksichtigen, um ihre Art des Umgangs mit Cybermobbing zu verstehen.

Schlagwörter: Bystander; Cybermobbing; innere Konflikte; Jugendliche; Opfer; Tabu; Täter; Wahrnehmung

1. Introduction

Since the late 2000s, empirical research, professional practice, the public and politics have increasingly devoted themselves to the dangers and challenges of electronic communication on the internet and with mobile phones. Complementary to, but also distinct from bullying,

the term cyberbullying has become increasingly emancipated to explain these problems and outline the specifics of the internet and social media (Menesini et al., 2012; Nocentini et al., 2010). In the following, cyberbullying is understood as an intentional and repeated harming of a person with the help of communication media such as mobile phones and the internet (Pfetsch et al. 2012). People who are affected are often those who have difficulty helping themselves, i. e. there is an imbalance of power between the parties involved.

Furthermore, there is a growing discourse and evidence on the importance of the perception of cyberbullying on the part of those affected, which has proven to be essential for this topic (Dennehy et al., 2020; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2014; Zdun, 2022a). A crucial aspect is addressing how those affected deal with and cope with cyberbullying. This includes, for example, the extent to which it tends to be ignored and tolerated or rejected and actively addressed. The associated complementary and not necessarily contradictory positions illustrate the complexity of the topic as well as the diverse challenges for those affected.

These aspects require further scientific attention and investigation. For example, it is evident that victims, perpetrators and bystanders perceive incidents of cyberbullying differently and it is becoming increasingly clear that they also deal with it differently (Dennehy et al., 2020). In view of the fact that young people sometimes even switch between different roles of cyberbullying, it is necessary to pay more attention to how those involved deal with this issue. Therefore, 1. the empirical question arises how different actors of cyberbullying perceive and describe the inner conflicts of being involved in such incidents. Furthermore, 2. this leads to the question in which different ways they deal with and process such experiences.

This paper adds to the growing body of research by examining the perceptions of those affected by cyberbullying through a study of 40 young people aged 13 to 17 from five major German cities. Based on a qualitative study, initial insights into these questions can be derived. This contributes to a better understanding of the lifeworld and perceptions of those affected.

2. State of Research

2.1 Cyberbullying Between Taboo, Rejection, Neutralisation and Justification

Victims of cyberbullying and perpetrators and bystanders have different ways of thinking about and perceiving such behaviour and the appropriate responses. For example, it is controversially discussed that many young people actually reject cyberbullying but see it more or less as normal or at least as unavoidable due to its prevalence (Bryce & Fraser, 2013). The overall development in Germany, for example, shows a significant increase in cyberbullying among children and young people. Between 2017 and 2020, the number of victims aged between 8 and 19 years in Germany increased from approximately 1.5 million to 2 million (Beitzinger et al., 2020). Furthermore, based on data from a recent study, Nolden (2020) states that about one fifth of 8- to 21-year-olds in Germany are affected by insults, defamation, exclusion and threats via the internet.

Not only because of the high prevalence, Crosslin and Golman (2014, p. 18) emphasise that "cyberbullying is not acceptable and should not be considered a 'rite of passage'". However, this requires a societal rethink, as Social Darwinist rituals and practices still largely shape the identity formation of adolescents in Western societies. As a result, such patterns of thought

and behaviour are passed on relatively unquestioned. Rather, they are equated with great assertiveness and tolerated to the extent that this is considered necessary in later competitive professional life. Critical reflection is therefore lacking here as to whether this is actually to be assessed as assertiveness or rather as harassment of others and thus not to be welcomed (Zdun, 2022a).

This is related to the philosophical and social discourse on the extent to which such behaviour is legitimate. What is morally indefensible, socially beneficial and legally problematic when individuals accept harming others for their own benefit and thus violate the "categorical imperative" (e. g. Kant, 1993). The assessment of cyberbullying is complicated by the fact that it is sometimes extremely difficult for those directly involved and outsiders to draw the line between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, which can vary individually, situationally and contextually (Dennehy et al., 2020; Gimenez-Gualdo et al., 2015; Mishna et al., 2009; Zdun, 2022b, under review).

Another facet of this problem is that not only is the assessment of such experiences difficult and may be different by different parties, but the relatively widespread tolerance mentioned above works largely to the disadvantage of the victims. This leads to the paradox that it is not just necessary to encourage victims to seek help and support. Rather, it is necessary to initiate a social climate and a change in thinking in the sense that from the point of view of other actors – including the social environment – victims' seeking help is not seen as a weakness, but as a strength and the right way to go (Spears & Taddeo, 2021).

This is because it is characteristic of such socially taboo behaviour that many actors prefer not to get involved, but to use neutralisation strategies to the detriment of victims – including attributing responsibility for their own suffering – or to ignore their burden in order not to get involved (Dennehy et al., 2020; Gimenez-Gualdo et al., 2015; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021; Patterson & Allan, 2017; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). This can be based on a variety of motives, ranging from avoiding anger and conflict to shifting responsibility onto others (Holfeld, 2014; Machackova et al., 2018). Despite the relatively high prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying, these attitudes of perpetrators and bystanders make it difficult to address this very taboo and shameful issue (Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Crosslin & Golman, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2012; Patterson & Allan, 2017). Another aggravating factor for victims is that they sometimes hide what is happening to them, not only out of shame but also out of concern that their environment might react with bans and restrictions on internet use. As a result, much remains hidden and is not addressed by victims and their families (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Dennehy et al., 2020; Mishna et al., 2009). This shapes their different ways of thinking and acting, as they are all motivated differently.

This is particularly evident in so-called "shaming", a variant of cyberbullying, which Braithwaite (1989, p. 100) defines as "social processes of expressing social disapproval". It is worth noting that perpetrators, and in some cases bystanders, justify their behaviour by claiming that online shaming serves to establish conformity and punish other forms of behaviour and appearance (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Klonick, 2016). They claim or even believe that they are just showing victims the right way to act. Accordingly, they may actually see their actions or looking the other way as legitimate, which is diametrically different from the perception of the victims, who see this primarily as humiliation and social exclusion and not at all as well-intentioned support (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021).

Generally, in this sensitive topic area, on the one hand, many actions are preferably about neutralising and legitimising one's own behaviour in order not to be criticised or involved and to

cultivate a positive self-image. On the other hand, some incidents are even ignored or tolerated by those affected, in the hope that the cyberbullying will then stop more quickly (Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021). Such passive strategies are used not least because many victims have no one they want to or can turn to in confidence, as there are various reservations, but also fears, about what would happen if they involve third parties (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Dennehy et al., 2020; Mishna et al., 2009; Zdun, 2022b, under review). They may also have false hopes about what they can achieve through passive responses (Adams et al., 2008; Dennehy et al., 2020). Proactive strategies, on the other hand, such as blocking certain contacts and online profiles or refraining from using certain media, are also often seen as a barely viable path or avoided because of a desire to avoid social and media isolation (Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Crosslin & Golman, 2014; Spears & Taddeo, 2021). For some victims, it is therefore a more favourable alternative to take revenge on perpetrators or third parties online for the purpose of "making amends", as such victim-perpetrator status changes seem to be easier online than offline (Englander, 2020; Guo et al., 2021; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020) – keyword: opportunity structures. However, this in no way defuses the overall problem, but rather encourages additional cyberbullying and subsequently further relativisation, which in such cases comes from victims becoming perpetrators (Corby et al., 2016).

2.2 Differences Between Victims, Perpetrators and Bystanders

A closer look at those directly involved shows that their situational and variable interpretation of corresponding experiences tends to complicate the situation of victims and makes it rather easier for perpetrators and bystanders to dismiss cyberbullying as harmless or to portray it as a matter of interpretation and exaggerated sensitivity on the part of victims. As mentioned above, all parties involved interpret the respective events individually, subjectively, situationally and contextually, as well as their own intentions and those of others. As a result, many victims tend to perceive their situation as oppressive, humiliating and hopeless, while perpetrators – in contrast to intervening bystanders – can relatively easily trivialise and justify their actions (Abu Bakar, 2015; Dennehy et al., 2020; Gimenez-Gualdo et al., 2015; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021).

In particular, victims are often found to be frozen in shame and fear (Dennehy et al., 2020; Englander, 2020; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021). However, scholars' assessments and interpretations vary regarding whether victims of cyberbullying find it easier than victims of bullying to fight back or confront their oppressors (Menesini et al., 2012; Nocentini et al., 2010; Scheithauer et al., 2021; Zdun, 2022b, under review). Firstly, there is evidence that they prefer to defend themselves online and switch victim-perpetrator status to compensate for the suffering they experience in the form of revenge (Englander, 2020; Guo et al., 2021; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020). Secondly, a counter-argument is that the great anonymity on the internet as well as the wide distribution and long-lasting permanence of the content of cyberbullying makes it more difficult for those affected to defend themselves (Abu Bakar, 2015; Betts & Spenser, 2017; Bryce & Fraser, 2013; Corby et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2009; Zdun, 2022a).

The two positions do not contradict each other, but complement each other and shed light on different aspects of the same problem. While one encourages further and additional offences because the victims themselves become perpetrators, the other addresses the solidification of the victim role. Both results hardly have a preventive effect, but more likely a reactive one and

even stabilise the phenomenon of cyberbullying. Following Corby et al. (2016), the change in victim-perpetrator status may also contribute to further trivialising the severity of the acts or the extent to which victims are hurt. It is obvious and also postulated by them that such victim-offenders subsequently tend to relativise their own victimisation experiences in order to legitimise cyberbullying committed by themselves and to present it as less serious.

A similar problem can be assumed for victims who prove to be very resilient or have good coping strategies and present themselves as such to the outside world (Gimenez-Gualdo et al., 2015). This is because their individual skills make them less vulnerable or help them to cope with these experiences. At the same time, their external presentation can lead perpetrators and bystanders to become additionally 'motivated', i. e. to act harder and become more blunted. As a result, either more merciless and humiliating action against other victims can be expected, or it becomes easier to portray them as oversensitive. So the benefit to some can lead to greater harm to others (Corby et al., 2016). This might be a reason why quite a few victims express suicidal thoughts (Bernath et al., 2020; Englander, 2020).

In contrast, many perpetrators tend not least to play down, neutralise or justify their behavior. In doing so, they take advantage of the fact that victims and bystanders often do not turn to third parties or to the perpetrators due to the taboo nature of cyberbullying and out of shame and fear. As a result, they sometimes behave more unrestrained and negate the consequences of their actions (Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Mayer & Vanderheiden, 2021; Meter et al., 2021). Gimenez-Gualdo et al. (2015) counter that perpetrators often tend to overestimate the impact of their actions on victims. However, this is detrimental to victims as well because it also leads to perpetrators acting even more harshly and mercilessly due to a loss of empathy (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020). It is remarkable in all this that despite their socially harmful actions, offenders are usually also concerned with a positive self-image and not only with compensating for their own problems; both are tangential to their intentions to act (Betts and Spenser, 2017; Corby et al., 2016; Dennehy et al., 2020). Therefore, they ignore the consequences (for others), for example, and tend to emphasise the "fun factor" of their actions, seeking out co-perpetrators or consenting bystanders whenever possible (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Dennehy et al., 2020; Englander, 2020; Nocentini et al., 2010). Moreover, perpetrators from the offline or online sphere sometimes become victims of cyberbullying themselves, resulting in a perpetrator-victim status change (Guo et al., 2021; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2014). Moreover, they not only characterise the widespread nature of cyberbullying, but also serve as additional justification for further actions by perpetrators who themselves become victims. The resulting cycles of continued cyberbullying are particularly characteristic of the online sphere and do not occur in bullying in a comparable way and to a similar extent (Englander, 2020; Nocentini et al., 2010; Scheithauer et al., 2021; Zdun, 2022b, under review).

The situation is even more complex for bystanders who side with the perpetrators or the victims, switch sides or are neutral. To reduce the complexity, we focus here on the ways of thinking and acting of those who might side with the victims and why they do not do so. Thus, the focus is on neutral or undecided bystanders who are more or less close to the victims. As mentioned, according to Patterson and Allan (2017), it is only certain people who always intervene, so to speak, mainly on principle. Otherwise, bystanders who feel connected and familiar with the victims are favoured, which puts them in a bind. However, the own data show that this is only partly the case in practice, which is why many victims or people who see themselves in danger of becoming victims in the future worry about who will stand by them in an emergency

and in whom they can confide (Zdun, 2022a). In this context, victims experience particularly serious losses of trust when supposedly good friends do not stand up for them or even turn against them out of fear or self-interest. Similar things are described, for example, by Dennehy et al. (2020), Patterson and Allan (2017) and Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008). They show that bystanders who are familiar with the victims partly weigh up whether they should intervene. This would depend on the context, the behaviour of the victims and the perceived causes and motives of the perpetrators; this can of course be used by bystanders to justify their own reactions in any way they wish. This is because, as mentioned earlier, it is aggravating for victims that many bystanders do not want to get particularly involved out of concern or fear of the consequences of interference (Englander, 2020). As a result, some perpetrator behaviour is downplayed, ignored or even justified, although their actions are actually unacceptable (Zdun, 2022a). In addition to obvious excuses, reactions to or misinterpretations of victims' behaviour also come into play. It is known, for example, that in contrast to the hopes mentioned above, passive reactions do not necessarily help victims if bystanders may gain the impression, or at least claim, that no intervention was necessary because the victims themselves did not offer any resistance (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Holfeld, 2014). Since victims' motives for reacting passively are beyond the perception of bystanders, the same applies if they cannot decide whether to act passively or actively because they are in shock and lack the courage and strength to act otherwise. This can also be interpreted as a mistake or weakness or serve to downplay the situation, which further minimises the chances of support (Holfeld, 2014). Another situational "misbehaviour" from the bystanders' point of view can be that they interpret the victim's behaviour and appearance as causal for the perpetrator's actions and thus neutralise them, which is called blaming the victim. In addition, the so-called bystander effect can occur (in the case of rather unknown bystanders), i. e. persons do not interfere due to the supposedly infinite audience on the internet because they shift the responsibility for this onto others in order not to attract attention themselves (Holfeld, 2014; Machackova et al., 2018). All in all, it becomes clear why those who most need help from bystanders sometimes do not get it, which in turn illustrates how much the situation in the taboo, shaming and fearful context of cyberbullying is to the disadvantage of the victims.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory was chosen because it can be used to inductively explore young people's perceptions of cyberbullying (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Given the massive increase in young people's use of the internet for social contact, a grounded theory approach was deemed most appropriate to elicit the perspectives of those involved and to explore the complexity of their experiences. Unlike in various other qualitative studies in recent years on perceptions of cyberbullying, problem-centred interviews were preferred instead of focus groups (Leavy, 2016). Our focus was on the individual perspective of the young people and choose an approach that should help to avoid interviewees having inhibitions about speaking out in the presence of (known or unknown) peers on this highly taboo topic. Therefore, problem-centred interviews were preferred which allowed respondents to talk about these issues in a more lighthearted way, i. e. not in front of peers, whose assessment as victims many young people fear and want to avoid the most (Englander, 2020).

Due to the legal situation in Germany when the interviews were conducted, this study did not require approval by an ethics committee. Nevertheless, it was reviewed by the data protection officers of Bielefeld University, internally reviewed by the team for ethical issues and continuously reflected upon in the research process. The interviews always required that the interviewees were informed in advance about the content of the study, about the purely scientific use of the data and about the anonymisation of personal data. Furthermore, the interviews were only conducted after the respondents had given their informed consent.

3.1 Participants

40 young people aged 13 to 17 from five major German cities were interviewed between 2014 and 2015. Seven female and 33 male young people took part.[1] The types of school attended or the degrees obtained represented the entire German spectrum. This contributed to the dispersion of the sample in terms of social origin, education, material situation and residential area. All respondents had in common that they owned a mobile phone or smartphone and had access to the internet at home via a computer.

They were mainly recruited by the interviewers in youth centres. In addition, interviews were conducted in municipal educational support facilities and youth shelters. The selection was done randomly based on the sampling criteria as well as spontaneous willingness to participate. The recruitment was supported by the cooperating institutions that actively promoted the importance of this research. Most interviews were conducted in the facilities, but some were conducted in other locations, for instance, secluded park benches. The interviewees were always given the opportunity to choose a place where they felt as comfortable and unobserved as possible to increase their comfort and willingness to give information.

The respondents were considered as perpetrators, victims and bystanders according to the above-mentioned definition by Pfetsch et al. (2012). Therefore, they were asked to what extent they had been involved in or had observed intentional and repeated harm to a person on the internet and to what extent there was a power imbalance between the participants. They were instructed to describe their respective experiences in detail; follow-up questions were asked in case of ambiguity or incompleteness.

3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Due to the topic of the study, problem-centred, reconstructive interviews (Leavy, 2016) were the obvious choice, as they take into account the framework conditions of a social situation, which are independent of subjective interpretations. Corresponding theory-based scientific presuppositions were taken into account when preparing the interview guide. The specification of a theory-guided structure, which – based on the research question and mediated by the comparative design – was finally reflected in the guide, has two advantages. On the one hand, it ensured that targeted questions could be asked in the course of the interviews as soon as new aspects emerged that contradicted the preliminary assumptions or seemed less significant in

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[1] The significant overhang was due to the fact that this was a study on juvenile delinquency, in which young males have a significantly higher prevalence and were therefore more strongly considered in the sample.

advance. Secondly, it made it possible to contrast the data, which our comparative design cannot do without. The guideline for the problem-centred interviews should cover all relevant topics and at the same time not stifle the interaction dynamics of the interview conversation.

The interviews began with a narrative-biographical entry. This variant has proven successful in previous studies (e. g. Kurtenbach et al., 2021; Zdun, 2020). Firstly, it enables the particular biographical perspective and the subjective relevance of the respondents to be ascertained. Secondly, narrative-biographical introductions or the resulting "Zugzwang" (Schütze, 1977) give the problem-centred interview part additional drive. Especially with sensitive topics, the interviewees tend to be more uninhibited and get into a flow of words.

The interview material was analysed in an analysis group, multi-stage and computer-assisted with the software MaxQDA. In order to do justice to the complexity of the individual cases, the interviews were coded and categorised in three steps according to Grounded Theory. The first analysis step was the open coding and linking of the qualitative data with the standardised data[2], in order to break down the material on a case-by-case basis. The second unit of analysis consisted of cross-case axial coding to identify patterns and differences between cases. The third unit of analysis consisted of an overall view of the results, selective coding, which was applied back to the individual cases. This application step served to compare the patterns with the individual cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

4. Results

Using a qualitative methodology, the perceptions and handling of inner conflicts of victims, perpetrators and bystanders of cyberbullying were investigated. The results provide rich insights into their experiences and behaviour. They are consistent with existing research findings, but also complement them. The analysis provided several insights into the themes derived in chapter two. These mainly addressed 1. the way the different actors of cyberbullying perceive and describe the inner conflicts they are involved in, and 2. the different ways they deal with and process such experiences.

4.1 Perceptions of the Inner Conflicts of Being Involved in Cyberbullying

As is empirically known, our own data suggest that status changes between participants in cyberbullying are not a rare exception, but seem to be relatively widespread; they occurred in more than half of the interviewees. However, this paper is mainly concerned with how different types of actors experienced involvement in cyberbullying, while status changes were not specifically addressed in the interviews and were only mentioned by some respondents on their own. In contrast, interviewees were specifically asked and were able to recall specific experiences as victims, perpetrators or bystanders – especially events from the recent past.

From the *victim's point of view*, the predominant concern was that no one could help them (sufficiently) if they became a victim. They were aware of their peers' fear that they themselves could be insulted and attacked by the perpetrators if they intervened, as well as of the taboo

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[2] This included above all the socio-demographic data of the respondents and the frequency of delinquency per year.

nature of cyberbullying. Therefore, those affected in the victim role sometimes felt like outcasts and outlaws, which of course nobody wants.

> "I don't know who would really help me. I would also be afraid to do that."

> "No one wants to side with such victims. If you get in the line of fire, it is considered justified. It becomes your fault. … It becomes stupid to intervene for the good of others when it seems to be common sense that supporters who help weak victims should also be attacked."

Moreover, they have partly developed the self-image of being rightly labelled and treated as victims, which is why they consequently see this as normal and tolerate it, even though they reject what is happening to them.

> "I don't want all that, but I know why I'm the target. It's because of the way I look."

This follows the social logic that such treatment is not without a certain justification, which the victims had also internalised because it is exemplified and propagated in society.

> "You learn everywhere from a young age that it's your own fault when things like this happen to you."

> "Although cyberbullying in school is largely demonised by teachers, social competition for recognition happens everywhere – including online, of course."

They found it particularly traumatising when bystanders who considered them friends turned away from them, which intensified their inner conflicts (cf. Zdun, 2022b, under review). Overall, the self-image could suffer massively from the inner conflicts of being a victim, which could go as far as neutralising the acts to one's own disadvantage, i. e. blaming oneself. Not least, this followed the motto of some victims:

> "Neither is cyberbullying acceptable, nor do you have to admit that it happened to you!"

Moreover, a feeling of hopelessness and helplessness could arise if no one intervened – especially no one who could prove helpful. Thus, those affected could not foresee how long the cyberbullying would last and how they could stop it.

> "It's not just this loneliness, but also the uncertainty of how and when it will stop again."

Online, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that the content remains largely permanent. The inner conflicts of the *perpetrators*, in contrast, were quite different. They did not want to identify themselves with their deeds (at least when asked from the outside) and be seen and portrayed as cyberbullies. This is probably due not least to the fact that they knew the taboo character and did not want to be seen as people who harm others in this way. Accordingly, they tended to neutralise their behaviour, e. g. by presenting it as a socially acceptable variant of shaming and attributing the blame to those affected.

> "I didn't mean any harm, but I wanted him to understand that he simply behaved wrongly. He should be happy that someone is telling him that. Maybe he didn't like that I did it in front of the others, but it certainly had more impact that way."

"If you present yourself like that, you don't have to be surprised if others make fun of you."

However, they also exploited the fears and concerns of victims and bystanders and were quite sensitive to resistance. Overall, they seemed torn between the personal benefit they derived from cyberbullying and the moral questions it raises, but also the fear of possible sanctions if it had been discovered. The latter was therefore a not insignificant motive for hiding and acting anonymously.

"Of course, you have to think about how far you go and whether it's still okay. But you also have to be careful that you don't get in trouble for it, because otherwise you'll be reported or something."

The personal benefit was, firstly, to have fun and relieve boredom and, secondly, to compensate for their own stress and problems. Their way of dealing with cyberbullying followed not least the motto:

"I know it's not okay, but it's cool and fun and part of growing up."

As already mentioned in the second chapter, *bystanders* could show the widest range of inner conflicts regarding cyberbullying. They were also well aware of the taboo character of these acts and – except in the case of direct intervention – were confronted with the additional taboo of not having helped the victims and possibly even having been involved.

"When you find out, you are in a really stupid position. On the one hand, it's already hard to deal with it and nobody wants to get involved. On the other hand, you face the problem that you can't really look away when something like this happens to others. Either way, you feel bad."

Especially the vast majority, who did not interfere directly or at all, looked at what was happening with mixed feelings. They knew they were doing something wrong, which is why they – like the perpetrators – justified and neutralised it. Even those who sided with the perpetrators admitted for the most part that they were aware that weaker and individual people should not be attacked in this way.

"Of course, everyone knows that it's okay even if you participate – especially if you participate. You make excuses and evasions, but nobody deserves that. You only take those who can't fight back."

However, this only meant that they made more effort to justify themselves than people who merely looked the other way. Like the perpetrators, all bystanders tried to portray their behaviour positively or to blame the victims (see also Beitzinger et al., 2020). Moreover, they could claim not to have acted themselves, so that they could also blame the perpetrators – not only for their behaviour, but also for their own reticence because they had not acted for fear of repression.

"You're just afraid to say anything against it. That's why it's not fair for you to act like you're the guilty one. Others did it and you just didn't intervene."

When it comes to close friends as victims, many bystanders felt a greater urge or need to get involved, but they also partly tried to avoid doing so if there were reasons not to, e. g. to avoid

becoming a victim themselves. Much of the bystanders' behaviour therefore revolved around excusable avoidance or even stepping in to protect themselves, which they were then quite ashamed of, illustrating the taboo nature of cyberbullying in particular. Furthermore, some of the respondents made it clear in their statements that they also see cyberbullying as a fun and entertainment factor. They admitted this only tentatively due to the taboo character, but an additional reason why some young people did not get involved was a kind of "gawker effect" they felt due to the attraction of the forbidden, without seeing themselves in particular danger of being prosecuted for their behaviour afterwards.

> "Even though you shouldn't say it, it's kind of fun, even though it's hard to admit it – at least as long as you're not the victim."

> "It's like a traffic accident, you can't look away. You don't react, you just watch. It's kind of exciting, also because it's something bad and you want to see how the victim reacts."

Apart from that, the bystanders' approach to cyberbullying seemed to largely follow the motto:

> "I know it's not okay, but what am I supposed to do on my own when everyone else is looking the other way?"

4.2 Dealing With the Inner Conflicts of Being Involved in Cyberbullying

On the one hand, the *victims* were frozen in shame and fear and tried to react to cyberbullying experiences by ignoring and trivialising them; on the other hand, it became apparent that some of those affected wanted to fight back and sought confrontation or put themselves on the spot through cyberbullying. Thus, their reactive behaviour ranged from a solidification of the victim role to their own perpetration, but could also include other forms of resistance, such as fighting back. It is noteworthy that former perpetrators expressed irritation and anger, but sometimes also shyness, when they themselves were victimised, as this was interpreted as weakness. The mottos of the respondents thus ranged in the spectrum from:

> "I want to free myself!"

to

> "Fuck them all, now I'm going all the way in!"

The *perpetrators*' way of dealing with the inner conflicts resulting from cyberbullying was oriented towards their self-image, the personal benefit of their actions as well as their taboo status. Accordingly, they tried to present their actions positively to themselves and others or to play it down. In addition, they were able to act even harder and more intensively to show that cyberbullying is basically okay and not as bad as it seems. In doing so, they specifically referred to reactions of victims who did not fight back in order to demonstrate their own toughness or who hoped that this would make it end faster.

> "If it bothered him, he could have reacted differently."

> "If he acts like a tough guy who can take anything, why wouldn't you try to break him?"

In addition, there were neutralisations to the disadvantage of the victims as well as an instrumentalisation of the bystander effect in the sense that such acts could not be so bad if no one interfered or even cheered them on.

> "If you really wanted me to stop, you should have intervened. I thought I was cool and only did more because you cheered me on!"

Some perpetrators also stated that they had only participated, i. e. they blamed the initiators or justified themselves by saying that they did not want to become victims themselves.
The *bystanders* reacted according to the perception of inner conflict outlined above, either by actually intervening – directly or delayed – or by justifying and neutralising their reticence to themselves and others. They weighed heavily who they helped and when, and which side they were on. This depended on many factors, or a wide variety of reasons and explanations could be given for staying out. These served not least the self-image and self-protection and were subsequently instrumentalised to the disadvantage of the victims.

> "I am so vulnerable, why should I put myself in the line of fire?"

Some bystanders even pretended to want to help, but were unable to do so and could not find suitable means.

> "It's one thing to disagree; it's quite another to take action against it – especially against really mean cyberbullies!"

Furthermore, bystanders tended not to intervene or intervened when the victims themselves did not react or played down what had happened, thus demonstrating toughness and strength.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the perception of inner conflicts in cyberbullying as well as the different ways victims, perpetrators and bystanders deal with such experiences. Through the analysis of the data, it became clear that these subjective aspects can just be truly understood and addressed if the individual and situational differences that are significant for those affected are taken into account.
In summary, it can be said that all respondents were aware of the fact that it is not only a social taboo to engage in cyberbullying, but also to be a victim. Corresponding acts were therefore largely rejected – at least superficially – although they were at least partly encouraged and triggered by bystanders and carried out by perpetrators primarily for their own benefit. This contributed to various inner conflicts among the participants, which not only led the perpetrators to use various kinds of justifications and neutralisations to explain and legitimise their own behaviour. The situation was similar for the bystanders, who, however, had to explain other behaviours as long as they did not directly side with the victims. The latter also partly justified the experienced cyberbullying or their reactions to it, which could range from avoidance behaviour to active resistance.

The findings confirmed the young people's inner dichotomy of rejecting cyberbullying but also seeing it as more or less normal or at least unavoidable (Bryce & Fraser, 2013). This was most powerfully demonstrated by the victims who, despite all their rejection of these acts, pointed to their prevalence and normality. Significantly, this could go so far that their self-image suffered from justifying experienced cyberbullying to their own detriment and blaming themselves for it. Following Spears and Taddeo (2021), this highlights the need to encourage and support victims to seek and accept help. This requires a social climate in which this is not perceived as a weakness but as a strength of the victim.

Overall, it was possible to additionally confirm among the victims, but also among the perpetrators and bystanders, to what extent the different actors are affected by and part of this taboo behaviour, so that various avoidance as well as neutralisation and justification strategies are used. Complementing and not contradicting e. g. Dennehy et al. (2020), Gimenez-Gualdo et al. (2015) and Mayer and Vanderheiden (2021), our own data allowed us to explore the variety of ways in which different actors behave. In this context, it is noteworthy and should be further investigated that some perpetrators instrumentalised the bystander effect by claiming that their behaviour could not be so bad if no one did anything about it, or that they were even cheered on by third parties.

The latter is particularly noteworthy because, in addition, the findings not only show the impact of the bystander effect or at least its potential to neutralise one's own behaviour. The data also provides some of the few existing findings that point to a kind of "gawker effect" among bystanders. Although they largely claimed that cyberbullying is wrong, at least some bystanders also mentioned the fun and entertainment factor of bullying. Even if they were not very open about it, so as not to break taboos and maintain a positive self-image, there was a great appeal in watching what was forbidden. Another was that they could find the jokes and pranks funny at the expense of the victims. It is likely that this not only applies to a negligible minority, but is often simply not asked about in studies. Therefore, this topic should be addressed more intensively in future research.

Another aspect is that, following Beitzinger et al. (2020), Betts and Spenser (2017) and Klonick (2016), cyberbullying has been partially neutralised as a form of shaming that only serves to change the victim's behaviour and online appearance, i. e. blaming victims for not adhering to certain social norms. The dissemination of such views not only damages the self-image and agency of victims, but also leads to an expectation of corresponding behaviour from perpetrators and bystanders. If they act in the awareness that they are doing the right thing and not breaking any taboos, this can lead to further disinhibition. This should be counteracted not merely from a prevention point of view. Preventive measures should take into account the different ways victims, perpetrators and bystanders deal with shame and the taboo character of cyberbullying.

The findings also show the danger of cycles of ongoing offences due to changes in status of the people involved. The inner conflicts of those involved seem to contribute to the accumulation of acts of revenge against perpetrators or third parties for the purpose of "making amends" online. This not just concerns the casual structures (e. g. Englander, 2020; Guo et al., 2021; Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020), but also points to the danger of a progressive relativisation of cyberbullying (Corby et al., 2016) due to the actors' desire to downplay their behaviour and the consequences of their actions. Even though no data is available on this yet, it can be assumed that such status changes between perpetrators and victims are used by bystanders as a further motive and excuse not to side with the victims. Since corresponding findings are not

yet available, it can at least be postulated that such changes can also be instrumentalised to trivialise cyberbullying, because it can affect anyone, anyone can take on any role and it is therefore the responsibility of those involved which role they take on in each case. This is at least supported by bystanders' reasoning as documented by Dennehy et al. (2020) and Patterson and Allan (2017).

To ensure that the researchers did not remain entrenched in their own world of experience, it was important to ask about the lifeworld of the young people. However, as their perspectives and interpretations were collected through the use of qualitative methods, the results cannot be generalised beyond the experiences of the respondents in this sample, as it is not known to what extent their views apply to others. This is tangential to the lack of representativeness of the data, which cannot be remedied even by connecting it to the state of research. Added to this are the limitations of the sample, which further limit the generalisability of the results and the informative value for other population groups. Finally, it must be taken into account that the interviews do not necessarily reflect the topicality and diversity of the different local trends in online behaviour, which are in a constant state of flux not only due to technical developments and the emergence of new social media providers.

Furthermore, the available data material not only illustrates the relevance of a stronger consideration of subjective aspects in the empirical investigation and prevention of cyberbullying, but also further limits of the state of research. This is a fundamental problem with taboo research topics, in the case of cyberbullying it is added that it is still a relatively young topic, so that there are various research gaps in areas where empirical investigations are quite possible and should prove fruitful. This results in a need for further research, taking into account different methodological approaches to look at this in different ways (e. g. with longitudinal studies) and with different research questions. This includes quantitative approaches that not only enable representative data, but could also increase the willingness of respondents to report on the quite taboo and shameful topic of cyberbullying. The latter could also be addressed through innovative methodological approaches that use, for example, "online diaries" of young people involved in cyberbullying as well as access to content of chat groups in social media. In addition, in-depth studies on the topic are also needed that further differentiate between target groups (e. g. gender, age, social origin, migration background, etc.) as well as variants of experienced cyberbullying (e. g. types of offences, modi operandi, different constellations of participants, experiences in different settings and online spaces, etc.).

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