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Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Bystander Behaviour Online Among Young People in Ireland

**DCU Anti-Bullying Centre,
Dublin City University**

Sandra Sanmartín Feijóo, Aikaterini Sargioti,
Beatrice Sciacca and Jane McGarrigle

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About DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

DCU Anti-Bullying Centre is a university designated research centre located in DCU's Institute of Education. The Centre is home to scholars with a global reputation as leaders in the field and hosts the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying. The work of the Centre is funded by the Government of Ireland, European Commission, Irish Research Council and industry partnerships and builds on 27 years of research on bullying in schools, workplaces, and online settings. The aim of ABC is to contribute to solving the real-world problems of bullying and online safety through collaboration with an extensive community of academic and industry partnerships. The extent of our resources and the collaboration between disciplines drive quality education, understanding and innovation in this field.



Ionad
Frithbhulaíochta
Anti-Bullying
Centre



About Webwise

Webwise is the Irish Internet Safety Awareness Centre (co-funded by the European Commission) and is part of the Professional Development Service for Teachers, a Department of Education funded support service. Webwise promotes safer, better Internet use through awareness raising and education initiatives targeting teachers, children, young people, and parents. Webwise develops and disseminates curriculum aligned resources that help teachers integrate digital citizenship and online safety into teaching and learning in their schools. Webwise also provides information, advice, and tools to parents to support their engagement in their children's online lives. With the help of the Webwise Youth Advisory Panel, Webwise develops youth-oriented awareness raising resources and training programmes that promote digital citizenship and address topics such as online wellbeing, cyberbullying and more.



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education



Co-funded by
the European Union



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Abstract

Research shows that cyberbullying is a significant issue encountered online by children in Ireland. Researchers and educators recognise the importance of the role of peer bystanders in bullying situations, but more research is needed in this regard within an Irish context. Moreover, there appears to be a general lack of literature on the role of bystanders in cyberbullying situations. Therefore, this research study commissioned by Webwise was conducted by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre and aims to explore online bystander behaviour among young people in Ireland. A sample consisting of 212 students aged 13 to 17 years completed an online survey including questions regarding participants use of the internet and digital devices and bystander behaviour.

The key quantitative research finding evidenced that victimisation online is prevalent with 45.3% of participants reporting that they had witnessed cyberbullying over the last number of months. The most frequent mistreatment identified related to direct verbal abuse and occurs most often on social media. Similarly, it is mostly initiated and perpetuated by strangers or classmates of the target. Another important finding of note is that, albeit bystanders are, in general, aware of the protective mechanisms provided by social media such as the in-app reporting tool(s) or block button(s), they tend not to use them to help targets. However, the responses to the *Behaviour during cyberbullying episodes* scale developed by Pozzoli & Gini (2020) showed that cyber-defending targets was more common than any other role.

Qualitative findings of participant responses showed that where bystanders take part in the abusive behaviour, they tend to either justify that the target was in some way deserving of the cyberbullying, that they were acting due to peer pressure, or that they perceived (cyber)bullying as normal behaviour. When asked about additional supports to assist bystanders to take responsibility, some participants felt that nothing can be done to suppress bullying, while others suggested technical improvements to be put in place or source alternative practical solutions outside of the online world such as digital etiquette training. Finally, when asked what advice they would give to those who experience bullying, the majority of participants responded that they would report the issue in-app and tell a trusted adult while some participants reported that they would not deliver any advice. The findings of this research study should help inform educational programme and prevention/ intervention methodologies to reduce cyberbullying and its adverse effects.

Key Findings

There is a high online connectivity among young people in Ireland. Most students in the sample had a **mobile phone with access to the Internet (98.1%)**, and their mean age for getting the **first smartphone was 11.72 years old**.

Cyberbullying is frequently witnessed online, with **45.3% of students surveyed report witnessing some kind of mistreatment online over the last months**, being therefore cyberbullying bystanders.

Various forms of direct verbal abuse are the most common online. From those who witnessed cyberbullying, **64.6% reported name calling**, and **mockery or insults were also witnessed by 63.5%** of the bystanders.

The space where cyberbullying most often takes place is social media. Of the bystanders, **60.4% reported having witnessed cyberbullying on a social network**.

Among those who reported witnessing cyberbullying, **31.3% said a stranger started it and 25% said other strangers joined in**.

Participants are in general aware of protective mechanisms provided by social networks, and report using those mechanisms to protect themselves, but not so much to help others. **The most common mechanism for helping other people is the report button used by 14.2%** of the sample.

The preferred persons to talk about witnessing cyberbullying were parents/guardians and friends. Of the bystanders, **30.2% told their parents about the cyberbullying witnessed and 29.2% told their friends**.

Bystanders are heavier internet and digital device users than their non-bystander peers. The rate of **bystanders interacting with content from other people in social media daily is 48.4%**, while for non-bystanders is **24.3%**.

Participants' comments tend to diminish the impact of cyberbullying compared to offline victimisation, but only a few recommend ignoring it. The main advice participants would give to people who are bullied online is to **report in the platform and tell a trusted adult or a friend**.


Introduction and Background

This research was commissioned by Webwise conducted by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre within the frame of Safer Internet Day [SID] 2023. SID is an EU initiative celebrated around the world, It is promoted in Ireland by Webwise; the internet safety initiative of the Department of Education, and aims to educate and raise awareness about promoting safer use of the internet, so that children and young people can responsibly enjoy the benefits of the internet, without compromising their safety and privacy. This research aims to explore the roles within online bullying incidents, routes of support for young people and barriers to responding/reporting or telling.

Peer communication tend to be more frequent in technological and online settings nowadays rather than face-to-face interactions (Gómez-Baya et al., 2019). This shift increases the chances to experience or witness cyberbullying (Beavon et al., 2022; Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido, 2021). Cyberbullying or online bullying has been defined as a type of bullying, and therefore a “wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Although there is still some controversy in the education community, this type of definition is one of the most widely accepted. In this sense, the need for repetition is one of the most questioned criteria of cyberbullying, since insulting or offensive content can remain online and be spread and forwarded with no further intervention from the original perpetrator (Menesini et al., 2012). It has also been highlighted that cyberbullying has its own defining characteristics as compared to traditional offline bullying (Slonje et al., 2013), such as ease of the perpetrator remaining anonymous, increased potential for the content to be spread, and greater accessibility to the target.

Cyberbullying is the most frequent negative experience children in Ireland encounter online. A National Online survey of parents and teens highlighted that 11% of all children say they have experienced cyberbullying in the past 12 months (NACOS, 2021). Although cyberbullying is estimated to be less prevalent than traditional bullying, its psychosocial impact appears to be higher (Campbell et al., 2012; Gaffney et al., 2019), stressing the need to develop effective prevention and interventions.

Bullying is understood as a group process with different possible roles of participation, among which bystanders have been found to play a key role as they can provide positive reinforcement that sustains the bullying cycle, or even end it with their non-acceptance of the victimisation (DeSmet, 2016; Salmivalli, 2010). Joining and assisting the mistreatment are obvious ways of perpetuating bullying, but bystanders can also encourage victimisation with sympathetic displays such as laughing, and even passive bystanding may be perceived as silent approval of the bullying (Kowalski et al., 2014; Salmivalli, 2010).



Researchers and educators have recognised the importance of peer bystanders in bullying situations, but more research is needed on the Irish context, and there seems to be a literature gap in general on the role of bystanders in cyberbullying (Beavon et al., 2022). The differences between traditional offline bullying and cyberbullying also remain in knowing how to respond to one or the other. Young people may require skills unique to the cyber environment and use technology in their efforts to intervene, such as knowing how to block someone or report them to the social media platform (Beavon et al., 2022). On the other hand, speaking about the victimization with others, particularly an adult, has been showed to be the most efficient way to tackle a bullying episode and increase the well-being of young people involved (Bjereld et al., 2019). However, students in Ireland tend not to tell anyone when they are targeted themselves or witness (cyber)bullying (Foody et al., 2017; NACOS 2021). Furthermore, the most frequent characteristics of cyberbullying or online victimisation/abuse in general need to be analysed in order to tailor awareness campaigns and prevention or intervention efforts. These characteristics include the specific behaviours that are being carried out, who are the targets and who the perpetrators (Feijóo et al., 2021). Besides, the role of environment and “Hotspots” understood as areas where the risk of victimisation would be higher have been researched for traditional school bullying (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2004), but cyberbullying research in this issue is scarce and has been mostly focused on computational analysis of charged language on social media (Ho et al., 2020), and not in spaces that may be facilitating cyberbullying to occur.

Therefore, gaining a better understanding of what supports teens are aware of, motivations/barriers to intervene in incidents and barriers to reporting, should directly feed into education programmes and help minimise cyberbullying and its impact. Therefore, Webwise commissioned DCU Anti-Bullying Centre to undertake research to explore bystander behaviour online in young people in Ireland as part of the Webwise *Silent Witness* anti-bullying campaign; explores the topic of online bullying and aims to spark conversations about how we can create more tolerant and inclusive online communities¹.

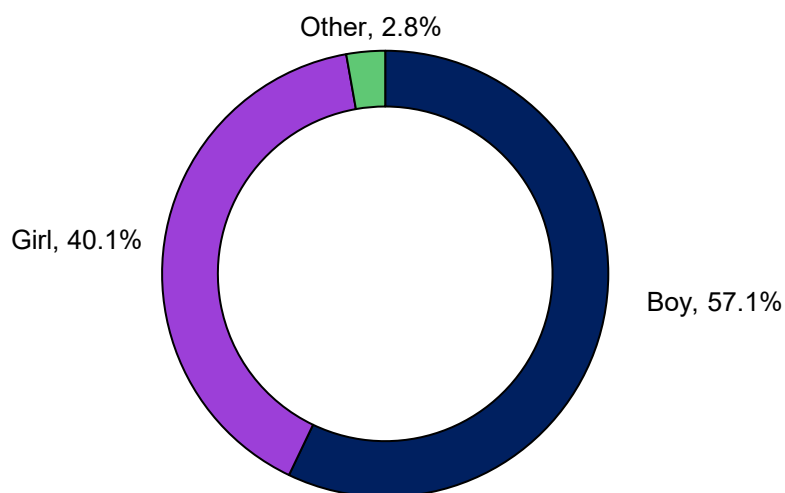
¹ Webwise *Silent Witness* anti-bullying campaign: <https://www.webwise.ie/silentwitness/>

Method

Recruitment and sample

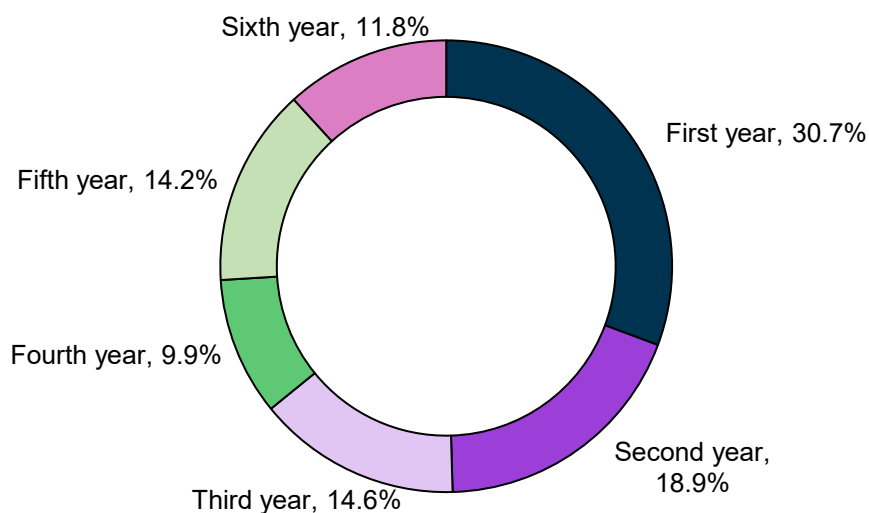
The sample of this research were 212 post-primary students in Ireland between 13 and 17 years old. Post-primary schools were recruited by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre and invited to participate in this research through an existing network of partner schools. School principals and teachers shared an online survey with their students and their parents/guardians in order to obtain parental consent and participant assent. In total, 583 parents accessed the online survey, with only 0.5% ($n = 3$) refusing to let their children participate. Parents/guardians who did not give their consent terminated the survey automatically, while those who consented to their child's participation would then invite their child to read their Plain language statement and complete the survey. All students were free to decline participation in the survey and were informed of such. They were also be informed that their responses were confidential and completely anonymous. From the 355 children that filled the assent form, 2.2% refused to participate. Therefore, 342 children themselves opted in the survey, but only 212 reached the question about having witnessed some kind of mistreatment online. Replying to this item was used as minimum criteria to be included in the final sample.

Figure 1. Demographics: sex



In the **final sample** ($n = 212$) 57.1% reported being boys, 40.1% girls and 2.8% other, specifying then being “non-binary” (Figure 1). Regarding their academic grade, the majority attended the first or second year, with half of the participants being distributed between the 3rd and 6th years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Demographics: academic grade



Measures

The online survey included items specifically developed for this study about **use of internet and digital devices** and **bystander behaviour** based on prior research such as Feijóo et al. (2021), NACOS (2021), and Feijóo (2022). Furthermore, the scale about **Behavior during cyberbullying episodes** developed by Pozzoli & Gini (2020) was used to explore the frequency of behaviours from four profiles of engagement in cyberbullying: **Cyberbullying** others, suffering **Cybervictimisation**, **Cyber-Defending** others, and being a **Cyber-Passive Bystander**. A higher score implies a higher frequency of the particular behaviour or cyberbullying role.

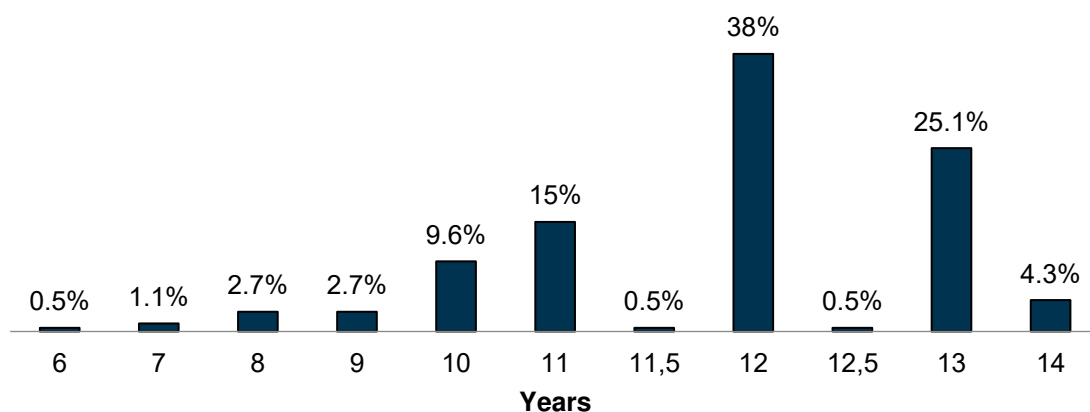
The main results of the survey will be presented divided into Quantitative Findings, presenting the response rates of the items presented above, and Qualitative Findings, highlighting participants' answers to a set of open ended questions inquiring about why they may have joined in bullying episodes, which extra supports can be put in place to encourage people to defend others, and what advice can be given to people who are bullied. These results are presented descriptively and in lay language, since no statistical analysis are included in this report.

Quantitative Findings

Online behaviour and digital device usage

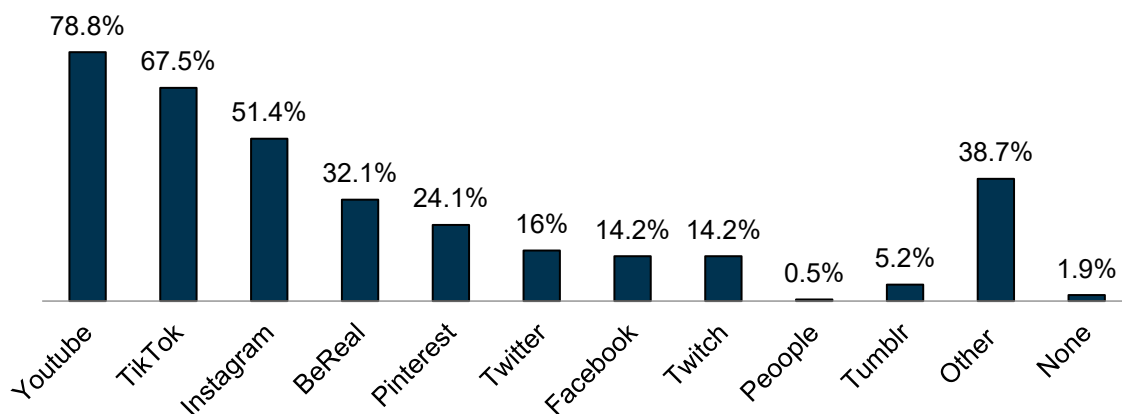
The vast majority of students had a mobile phone with access to the Internet (98.1%), which they got mostly between the ages of 11 and 13. The mean age of getting the first smartphone was 11.72 years old, and the full range of reported ages is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Age of getting the first smartphone



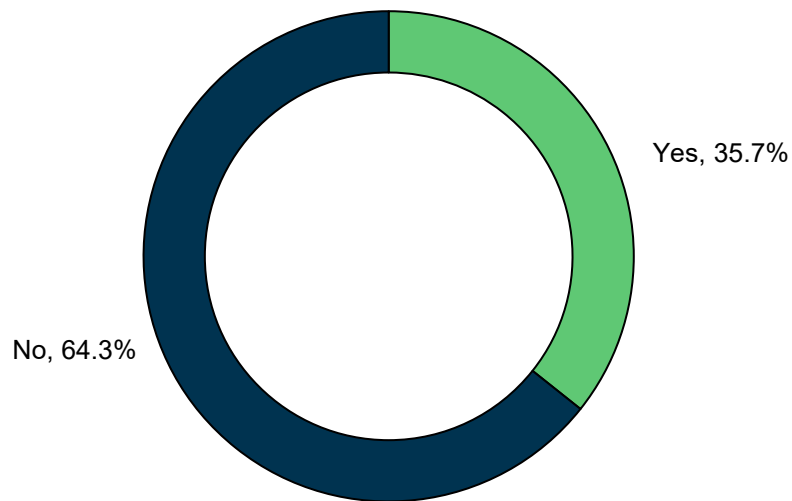
The most common social networks young students are registered on are YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, and only 1.9% reported not using any social network (Figure 4). Participants could mark all the social networks they had on this item and had also the option to report using other options not originally contemplated on the survey, and 38.7% did so. Among those using other social networks, 90.1% indicated Snapchat, 8.4% Discord, 2.4% VSCO, 1.7% Reddit and 1.7% Wattpad.

Figure 4. Social networks used regularly



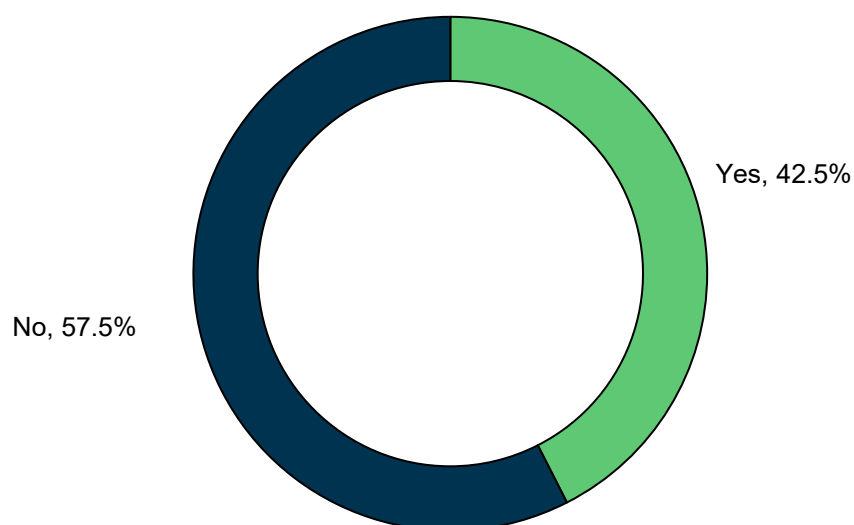
Delving into social media use, young people were asked if they had more than one account or profile in any social network and whether their profiles were public. One third of the participants had more than one account or profile in the same social network (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Having more than one account per social network



Almost half of the students had a public profile or account (Figure 6), meaning that anyone who is not on the participant contact or friendship list could see all the content they were sharing.

Figure 6. Having a public profile or account

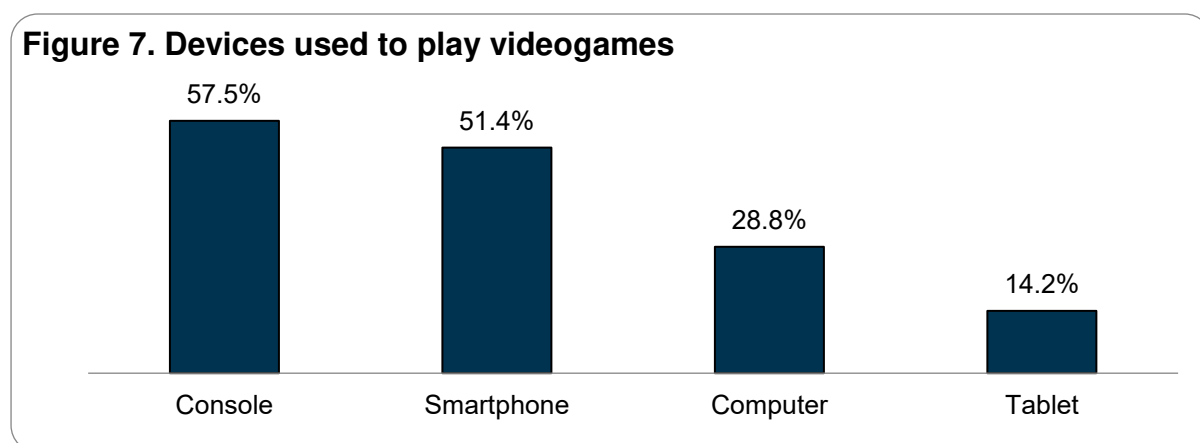


Participants were also asked about several activities they could be doing with their digital devices (Table 1). The most common activity undertaken daily was playing video games and interacting with someone else’s content, like commenting, reacting, or liking their posts. When they played video games, they mostly used consoles or smartphones. More than half of the sample (54%) slept with their devices on the same bedroom daily, but only 13.3% reported using those devices after midnight. An N/A option was available for those who did not had social media or their own smartphones.

Table 1. Digital devices usage in the last few months

	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Uploaded photos, stories or videos of themselves to social media	45%	37.4%	9%	5.7%	2.8%
Interacted with others content (comments, reactions, likes)	15.7%	36.7%	11%	35.2%	1.4%
Slept with their mobile phone, tablet, or console in the bedroom	14.7%	21.8%	7.6%	54%	1.9%
Used their mobile phone, tablet or console after midnight	37.6%	33.3%	14.3%	13.3%	1.4%
Used their mobile phone in class without permission	52.1%	29.9%	4.3%	9.5%	4.3%
Played video games (mobile, tablet, console or computer)	13.6%	24.3%	22.8%	39.3%	-
Played online games with friends	24.3%	32.5%	23.8%	19.4%	-
Played online with people they did not know priorly	57.4%	26.2%	7.4%	8.9%	-

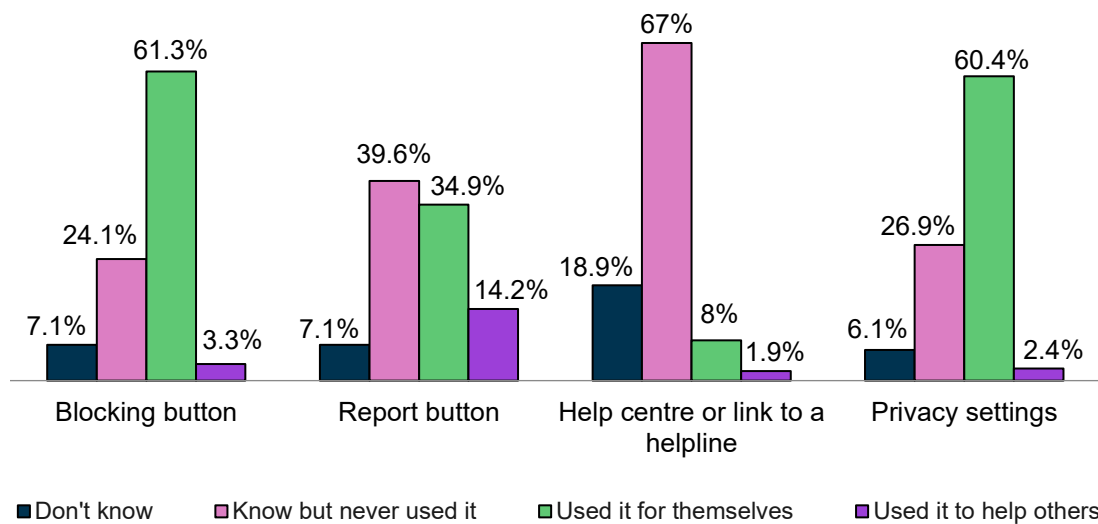
When asked about the devices they normally use to play, consoles and smartphones were reported as the most common (Figure 7).



Among the protective mechanisms provided by social networks, participants in their majority were aware of the blocking button, the report button as well as of the help centres or helplines and privacy settings (Figure 8). They reported having used most of these mechanisms to protect themselves, with help centres/helplines less used yet known by most participants. The rates were lower when asked about using those

mechanism to help others. Even with the report button the most frequently used for helping other people, only 14.2% of the sample indicated having done so.

Figure 8. Awareness and usage of online protective mechanisms



Cyberbullying roles

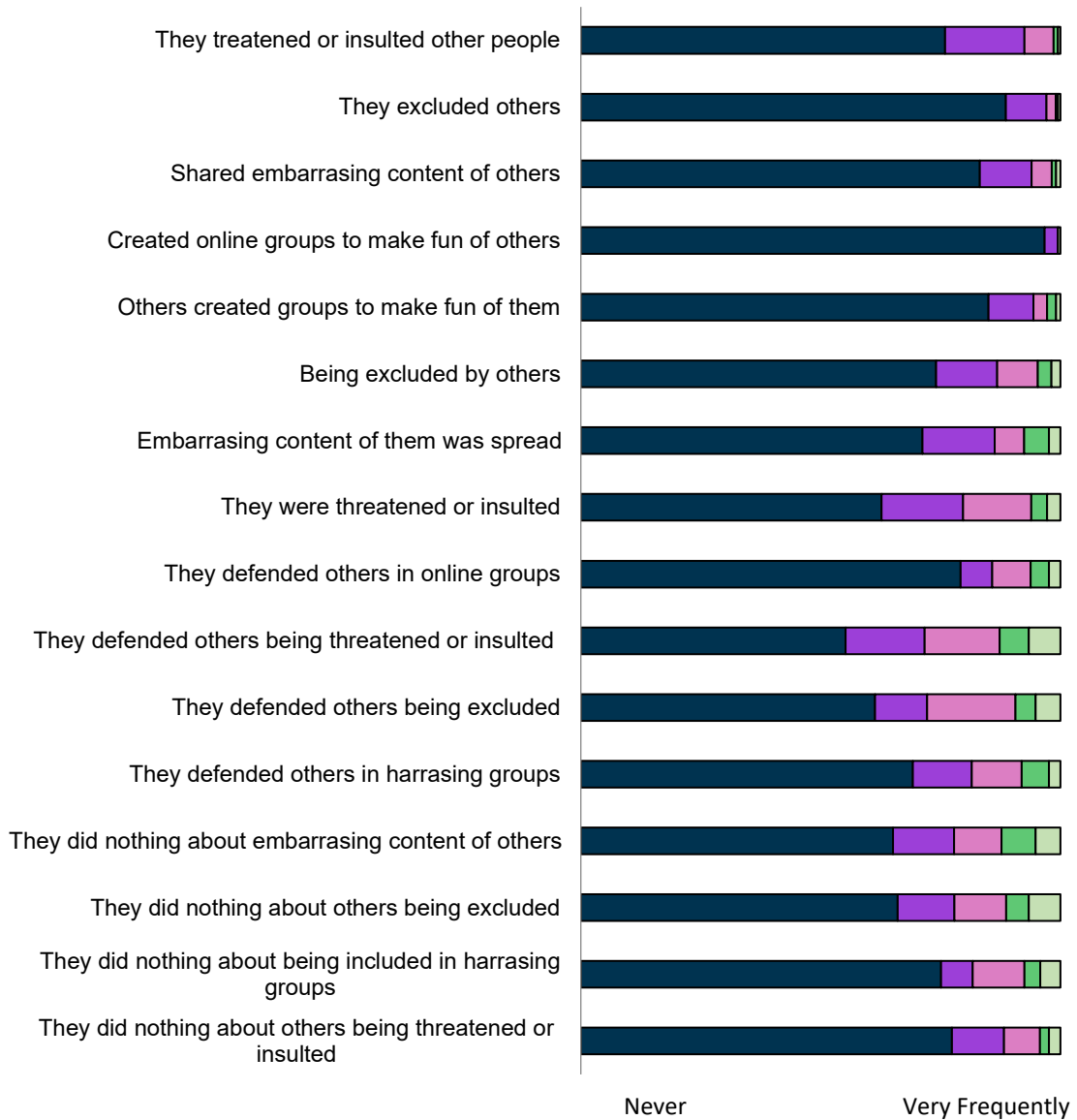
The *Behavior during cyberbullying episodes* scale (Pozzoli & Gini, 2020) was used to identify Cyberbullying, Cybervictimisation, Cyber-Defending, and Cyber-Passive Bystander roles. The means for each of the 16 items of the scale and 4 roles were calculated and are presented in Table 2. The role of Cyber-Defending was found to be the most frequent followed by Cyber-Passive Bystander. Witnessing cyberbullying is more frequent than being directly involved as either the target or a perpetrator.

Table 2. Cyberbullying behaviours and roles

		Item mean	Role mean
Cyberbullying	I threatened or insulted someone using the Internet or the phone	1.33	1.20
	I excluded someone from an online group to make him/her feel bad	1.16	
	I shared someone's pictures or images to make fun of him/her	1.26	
	I created online groups to make fun of someone	1.05	
Cybervictimization	Someone created an online group in which people made fun of me	1.25	1.47
	I was excluded from an online group without reason, only to make me feel bad	1.46	
	Some of my embarrassing pictures or images were spread without my permission	1.52	
	I was threatened or insulted via the phone or the Internet	1.67	
Cyber-Defending	I was included in an online group to make fun of someone, but I defended him/her	1.43	1.69
	I defended someone who was threatened or insulted via the phone or the Internet	1.92	
	When someone was excluded from an online group of which I was a member, I defended him/her	1.81	
	I defended someone who was excluded from online groups or chats created only to make him/her feel bad	1.59	
Cyber-Passive Bystander	I received embarrassing pictures or images of someone, I saw them but I did nothing because it was not my business	1.75	1.61
	When someone was excluded from an online group of which I was a member, I minded my own business	1.74	
	I was included in an online group to make fun of someone, but I only read without directly participating	1.55	
	I was aware that someone was threatened or insulted via the phone or the Internet and I did nothing	1.41	

On figure 9, we show the reported frequency for each of the items, that could range from “never” to “very frequently”. “Never” was the most frequently reported option in all items.

Figure 9. Frequency of cyberbullying behaviours



Bystander behaviour

Almost half of the participants (45.3%) witnessed someone being victimised online at least once within the last months, with the most common behaviour being name calling, mockery or insults, and spreading rumours online. Cyberbullying was witnessed mostly on social networks, while the reasons for being targeted were equally distributed highlighting slightly more the LGBT+ community, women, and people with over/underweight, but several other reasons were commonly reported.

In addition to the items addressing bystanding behaviours on the *Behavior during cyberbullying episodes* scale, participants were asked directly if they had ever witnessed someone being mistreated online in the recent months, which would make them cyberbullying bystanders for the purposes of the present study. Figure 10 shows the direct frequency reported by the sample, while Figure 11 highlights the total percentage of those who had encountered cyberbullying recently, regardless of its frequency. Participants replying positively to these items encountered an additional set of questions about the characteristics of the cyberbullying witnessed.

Figure 10. Frequency of witnessing cyberbullying

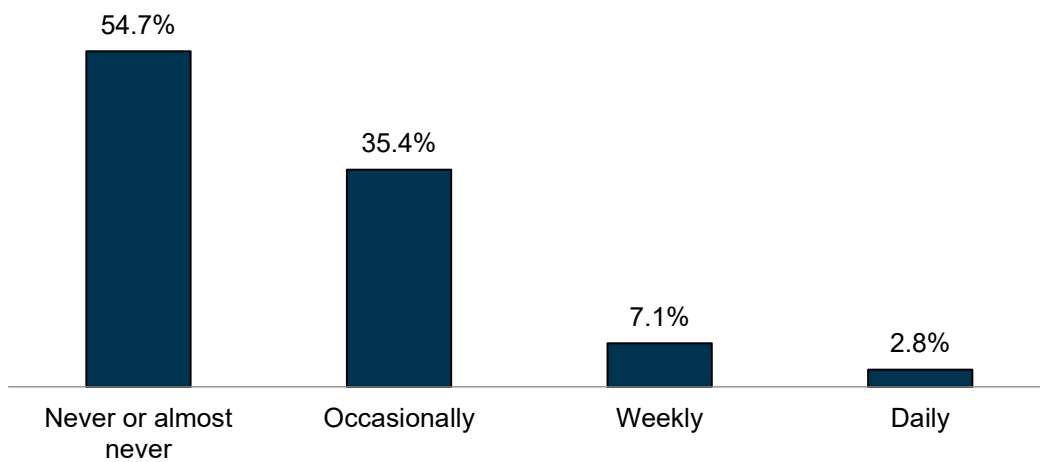
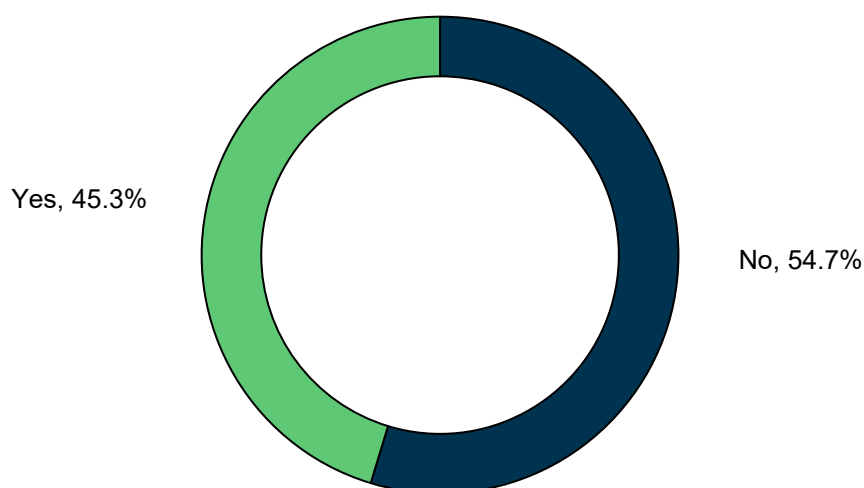
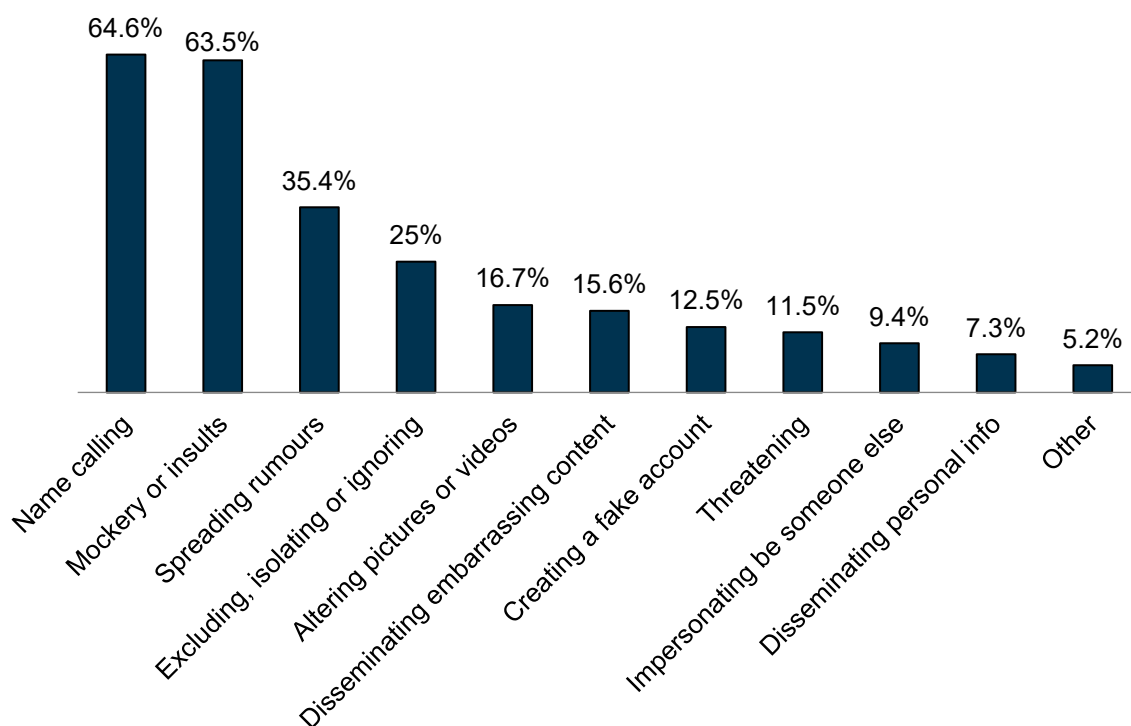


Figure 11. Having ever witnessed cyberbullying



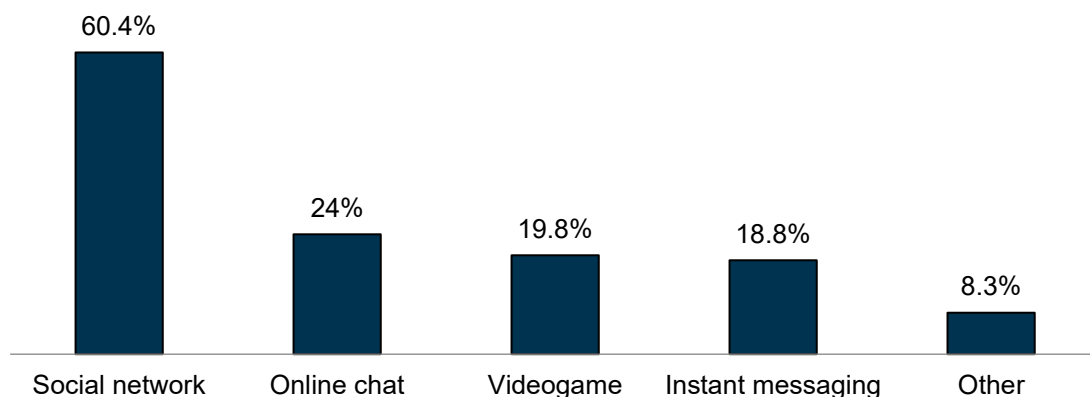
Participants who reported having witnessed someone being targeted online were asked about the type of behaviour they had observed and had the choice to mark several options if needed. They could report other options not originally included on the survey, and 5.2% did so but chose not to disclose the specifics of the behaviour when prompted to do so. Name calling, mockery or insults were the most frequent types of cyberbullying encountered, with two thirds of the sample reporting them. The spread of rumours online was the third most common, reported by one third of the participants (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Type of cyberbullying witnessed



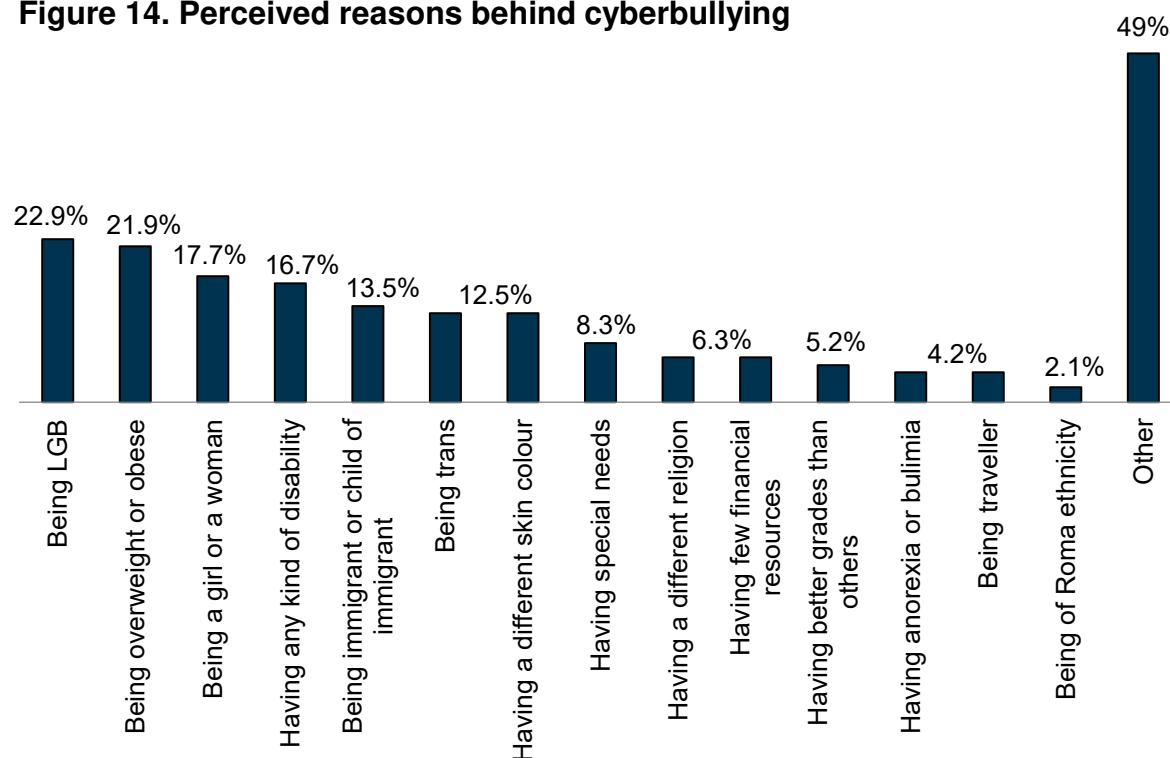
When asked about where they had witnessed cyberbullying, social networks were the most common by far (60.4%), while online chat, videogames and instant messaging all had rates close to 20% (Figure 13). Other spaces referred by the sample were the school setting in person, but participants did not further specify if the incidents were completely offline and therefore not the object of study of the present project, or whether they were an offline follow-up to something that had originated online.

Figure 13. Spaces where cyberbullying was witnessed



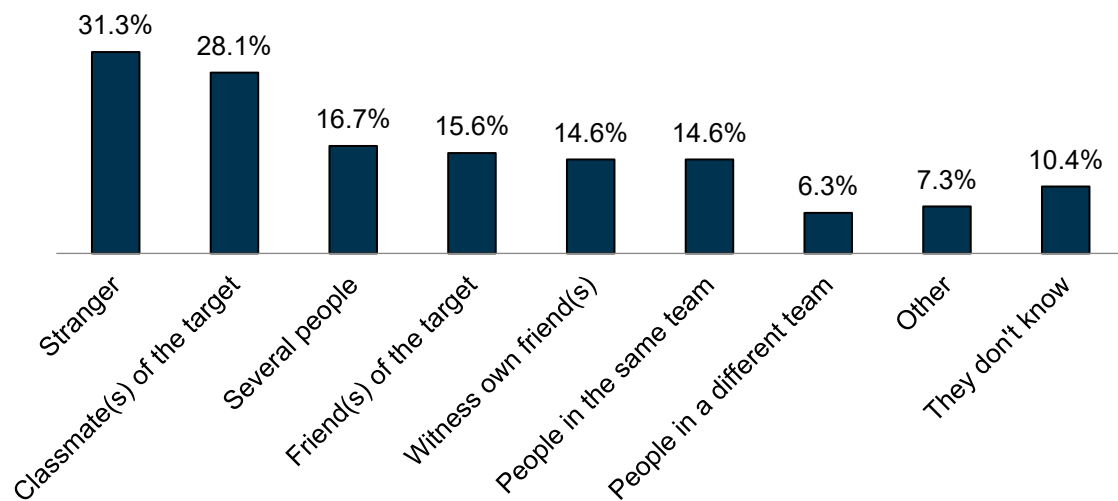
The perceived reasons behind the victimisation proved to be quite diverse, with the “Other” category being the most reported by the sample (Figure 14). The broad set of additional motivations to target others include banter, people being jealous, or even felling no reason as to not doing it, but the most frequently reported relate to some characteristic of the target. These added characteristics reported by the sample were being bald, ginger, new to the school, a boy or a man, an idol, “annoying”, rude or irritating to others, and “being bad at videogames”.

Figure 14. Perceived reasons behind cyberbullying



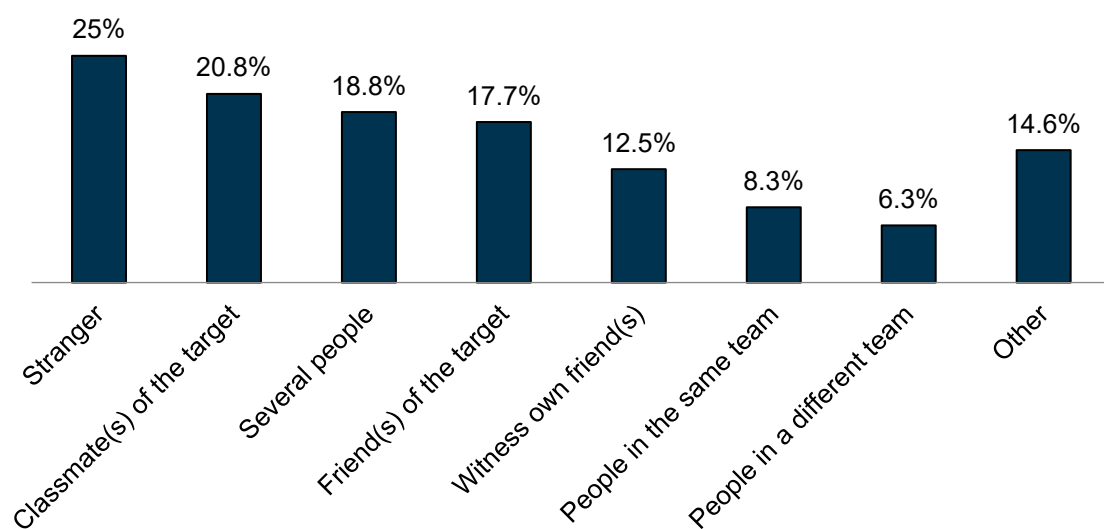
The vast majority of people who started the negative online behaviour were either strangers or classmates of the targeted person (Figure 15). The rate of people who initiated victimisation in a match or game was more than double for people in the same team than for people in a different team. Those who reported “other” did not report further information, and 1 in 10 of the sample directly indicated not knowing who had started the online bullying.

Figure 15. Who started the cyberbullying episode



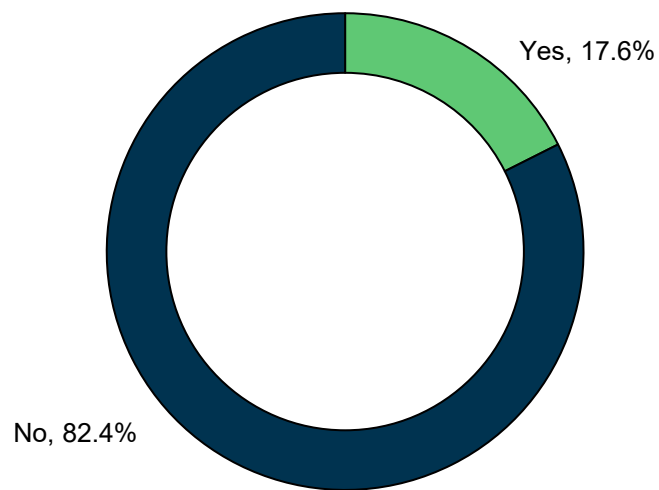
When asked if anyone else joined the event, the most frequent profiles were the same ones that started the event: strangers or classmates (Figure 16). Participants reporting “other” did not specify who were those other people, but 1.4% further clarified that no one else joined in the victimisation.

Figure 16. Who joined in the cyberbullying episode



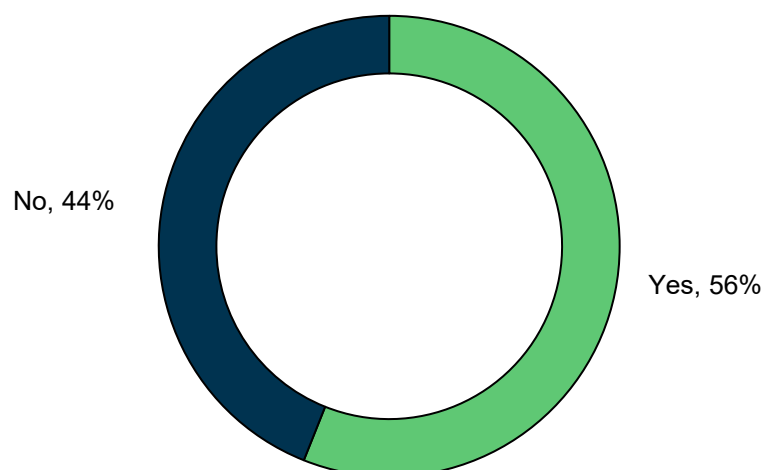
Participants were then asked directly if they had joined in, and most of them (82.4%) reported that they have not joined in the negative behaviour themselves (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Participants joining in cyberbullying



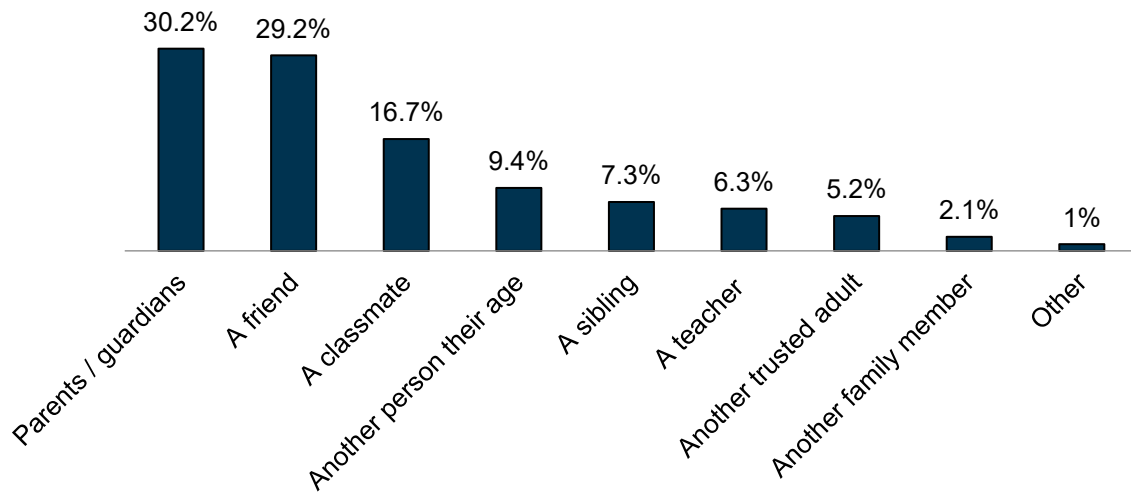
Half of the participants (56%) who reported that they witnessed mistreatment online stated that they told someone about this experience (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Telling someone about the cyberbullying witnessed



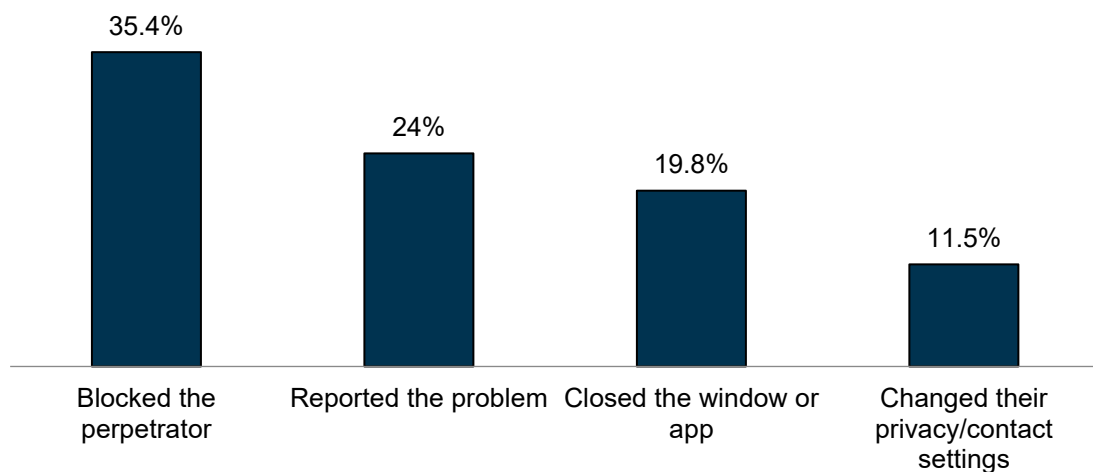
The preferred persons to talk about witnessing cyberbullying were parents/guardians and friends, while teachers are among those that students approach less to report cyberbullying (Figure 19). When participants reported having spoken to someone else, this other person was the target of the victimisation themselves.

Figure 19. Who is told about the cyberbullying witnessed



Beyond reporting, the most common action participants took was blocking the person who initiated the incident, followed by reporting it to the platform, while the least common action was to change their privacy or contact settings (Figure 20).

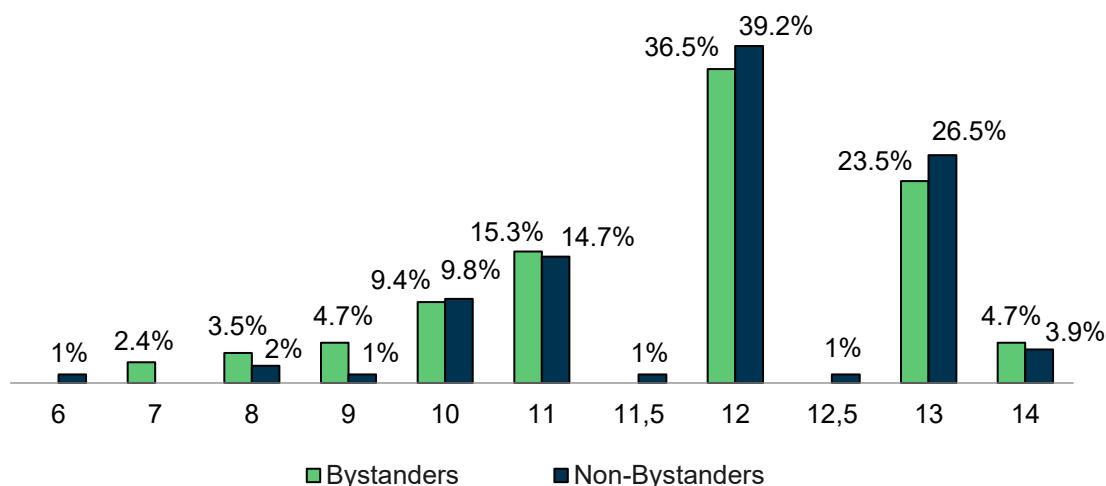
Figure 20. Actions beyond reporting



Bystander and online behaviour

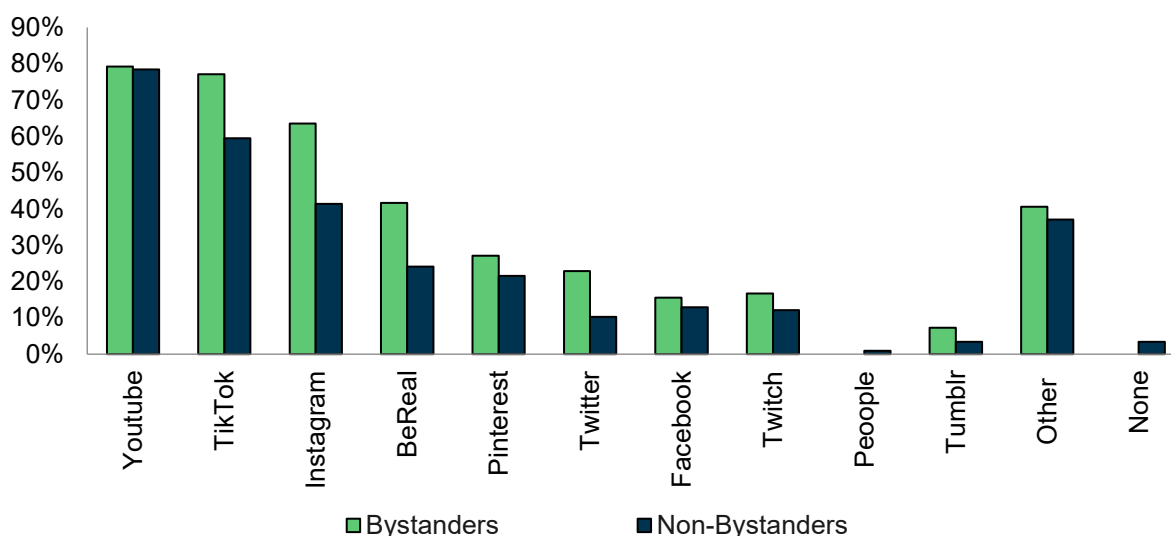
All the participants who reported being bystanders had a mobile phone with access to the Internet. Among them, most bystanders got their phone between the ages of 12 and 13 (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Age of getting the first smartphone



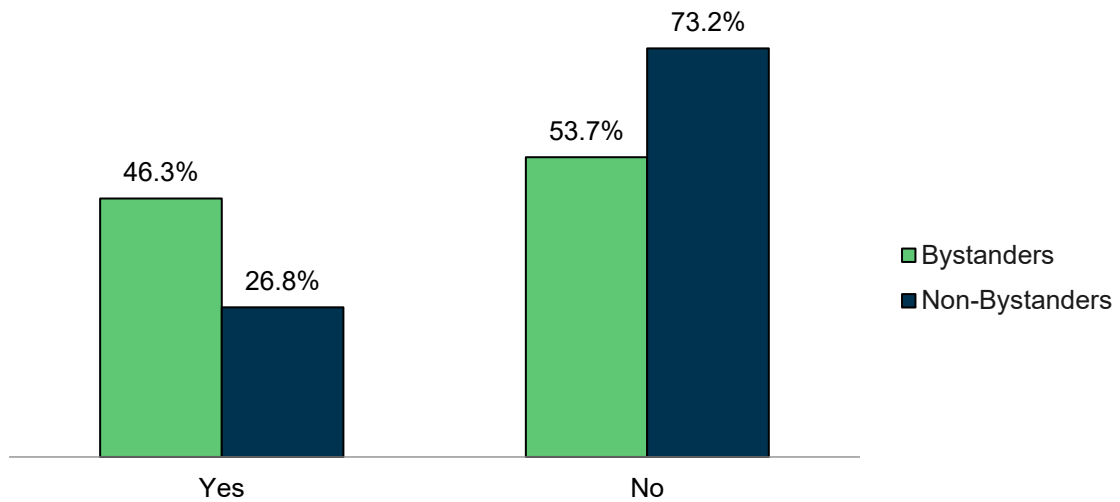
Young students who witness cyberbullying are all registered on at least one social network. The most used social media platforms on which young people witness bullying are TikTok and Instagram, that jointly with BeReal showed the greatest disparity in rates between bystanders and non-bystanders (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Social networks used regularly



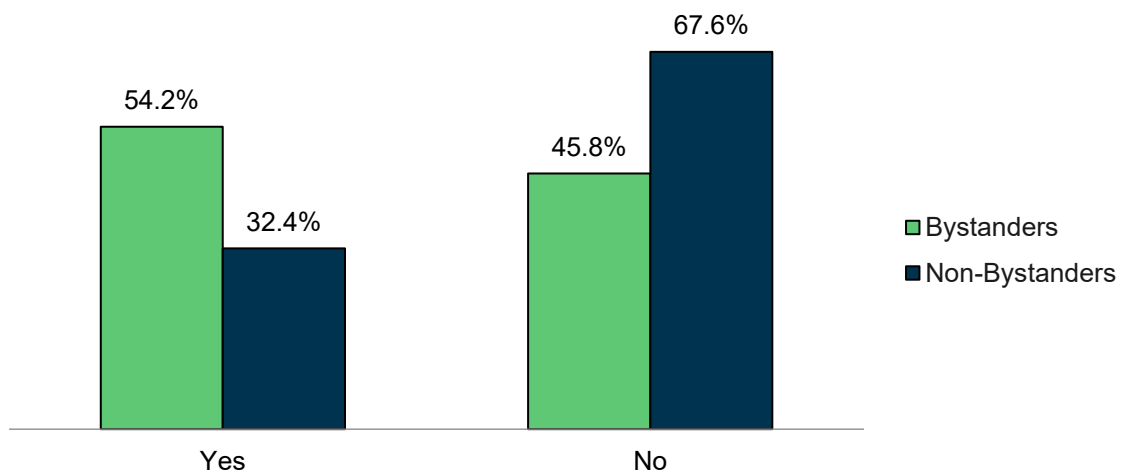
Adolescents who have more than one profile account tend to witness more cyberbullying than those who have only one.

Figure 23. Having more than one account



Almost half of the participants who witnessed online bullying had a public profile or account (Figure 24).

Figure 24. Having a public profile or account



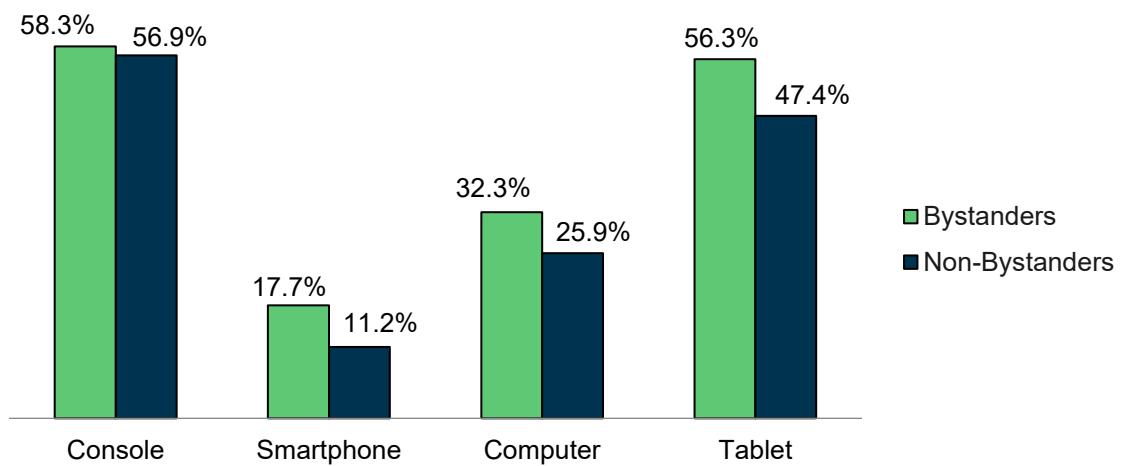
Regarding digital device usage, it can be observed that bystanders have a higher use of social media and their smartphone, sleeping with it in the bedroom and using it in the classroom more frequently (Table 3).

Table 3. Digital devices usage in the last few months by bystander status

	Frequency of usage				
Uploaded photos, stories or videos of themselves to social media	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Non-Bystander	53%	32.2%	6.1%	4.3%	4.3%
Bystander	35.4%	43.8%	12.5%	7.3%	1%
Interacted with others content (comments, reactions, likes)	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Non-Bystander	21.7%	40%	11.3%	24.3%	2.6%
Bystander	8.4%	32.6%	10.5%	48.4%	0%
Slept with their mobile phone, tablet, or console in the bedroom	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Non-Bystander	19%	25.9%	4.3%	49.1%	1.7%
Bystander	9.5%	16.8%	11.6%	60%	2.1%
Used their mobile phone, tablet or console after midnight	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Non-Bystander	44.8%	34.5%	11.2%	7.8%	1.7%
Bystander	28.7%	31.9%	18.1%	20.2%	1.1%
Used their mobile phone in class without permission	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	N/A
Non-Bystander	62.1%	22.4%	2.6%	6.9%	6%
Bystander	40%	38.9%	6.3%	12.6%	2.1%
Played video games (mobile, tablet, console or computer)	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	
Non-Bystander	14.2%	19.5%	23%	43.4%	
Bystander	12.9%	30.1%	22.6%	34.4%	
Played online games with friends	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	
Non-Bystander	25%	34.8%	20.5%	19.6%	
Bystander	23.4%	29.8%	27.7%	19.1%	
Played online with people they did not know priorly	Never or Almost never	Occasionally	Weekly	Daily	
Non-Bystander	67.6%	20.4%	7.4%	4.6%	
Bystander	45.7%	33%	7.4%	13.8%	

When asked about the devices they normally use to play, bystanders of online bullying reported similar common devices as non-bystanders, with consoles and smartphones having been reported as the most common for both groups but the console particularly for non-bystanders. All other devices were more frequently reported by those who had witnessed cyberbullying (Figure 25). In summary and unsurprisingly, those with higher usage of social media and digital devices are most likely to encounter online bullying.

Figure 25. Devices used to play videogames



Qualitative Findings

Why they had joined in

Those participants reporting ever joining in a cyberbullying episode, were asked a follow-up question about why they had done it they needed to answer on their own words. Results seem to be equally aligned with either justifying that the other person deserved being targeted, being under some kind of peer pressure, or an overall normalisation of (cyber)bullying.

Justifying that the person deserved to be targeted was done based on them being rude or aggressive first, believing defamatory rumours, and social norms potentially linked to gender the target was perceived to deviate from. This was mostly done by older students, and their verbatims can be found below:

“Either friendly banter or against people online who are rude” (Boy, 5th Year)

“He would make fun of me so I would make fun of him” (Boy, 3rd Year)

I joined in because I kind of believed what was being said until I found out the truth
(Girl, 6th Year)

“No boundaries with people’s boyfriends” (Girl, 6th Year)


Peer pressure was mostly informed by younger students perceiving cyberbullying as something a group they wanted to belong to was doing or wanting to avoid the negative consequences they could face for deviating from group behaviour. Older students reported suffering peer pressure explicitly, and therefore being aware of this social dynamic even if they are subject to it regardless.

“I felt as if I did not my friends would ask me why I was standing up for them” (Girl,
1st Year)

“Everyone else was” (Boy, 2nd Year)

“Peer pressure at the time” (Boy, 4th Year)

“To belong” (Girl, 5th Year)



A normalisation of (cyber)bullying has been expressed by several participants, either by perceiving the abuse enjoyable for themselves and not realising the implications and consequences for the target, because they consider (cyber)bullying part of normal communication in a specific setting such as gaming, or even by reporting that online bullying is less severe than doing the same behaviour in person.

“Because in video games shit talk is pretty standard and funny mostly between both parties. If someone doesn't like it there's options to mute the person and you'll never hear from them” (Non-binary, 6th Year)

“Felt it was just a laugh” (Boy, 5th Year)

“It was funny” (Girl, 3rd Year)

“I excluded and ignored him... because I really dislike him... but never vocal to him in person” (Boy, 6th Year)


Extra supports to help people step in

When asked about the extra support people would need to step in and defend the targets of online bullying, some participants feel nothing can be done about cyberbullying, and therefore had nothing to propose in this item. Reference has also been made to employing mechanisms to minimise damage even if prevention feels impossible.

“People need to put their account on private because it's always going to happen” (Girl, 3rd Year)

“There aren't any. People will be more honest/more cruel when they're aren't face to face. People will say what they want and there is absolutely nothing that can be done about that. All you can control are your own reactions” (Boy, 4th Year)

“When things are online it's not possible to dismantle things like this and I think it's in unachievable to not have some sort of bullying on social media” (Boy, 6th Year)



Most participants suggested implementing some kind of technical improvement or a better management from the social media or digital service providers, with several participants calling for the facilitation of reporting and be provided a prompt response to the situation.

“A quicker response from social media platform when you report someone or something” (Boy, 5th Year)

“There should be a button to leave anonymous reviews about them to the online app and then they can handle it from there” (Girl, 3rd Year)

“Word blocker” (Boy, 4th Year)

Some participants go beyond the screens searching for potential solutions, such as receiving training and involving the schools. The training requested includes information on how to act, emotional intelligence to understand the consequences of bullying, and developing self-confidence to be able to act when witnessing someone being cyberbullied. Some comments also hint of the need for awareness campaigns and information to be easier to access. Teachers stand out as an important figure in this context.

“Confidence building workshops to teach kids to report” (Girl, 2nd Year)

“Education making it okay to tell [and] not be seen as being a snitch [if] I get bullied for standing up for someone or beaten up that stops me from doing it the next time. Teachers don’t do anything, they are not where the bullies are” (Boy, 2nd Year)

“Education regarding the effects of mistreatment online as well as easy to navigate systems. If it’s difficult to report a problem, people give up easier” (Non-binary, 5th Year)

“School should have a person you can confide in” (Girl, 2nd Year)

Finally, there is also a refusal to get involved unless they know the target and advising others to do the same.

“The "mistreatment" I witness is either in the form of a comment or thread of comments on someone’s video or a video that someone makes about someone else. All of these people are strangers and I don't concern myself with random drama on the internet. It's not healthy” (Boy, 4th Year)

Advice to people who are (cyber)bullied

When prompted to give advice to people who are bullied, very few participants refused to do so, some participants used the slogan from the campaign “Stop, Block, Tell”, while most follow a similar approach using their own words to advise to report and/or tell someone to get help, particularly a trusted adult but not necessarily a parent. It is recommended to have evidence such as screenshots of what happened and report to the Gardaí if the situation is serious. It is also advised to seek emotional support from friends and even one participant advised to confront the perpetrator to understand the behaviour. Several participants expressed concern about the targets and acknowledged the negative consequences online victimisation and cyberbullying can have, while others believe bullying is not so serious when it happens online. Screen breaks are advised after being targeted, particularly from the social media it happened on. An example of comments along these lines can be seen below.

“Block and report the person that is bullying you and talk to a trusted adult about it and in the meantime talk to your friends and have fun with them” (Boy, 2nd Year)

“Bullying online can be cruel, but unlike in real life any of these problems can be solved by the simple press of the block button, if it’s something a little more serious you can click the report button and get the bully’s account banned. And if you happen to know the bully in real life but the bullying only occurs online it’s a great idea to take screenshots as evidence and report them to a teacher, guidance counsellor or a trusted adult” (Girl, 5th Year)


“Speak to either a peer who will support you to speak up or speak to an adult. Don’t try to hide it or it could get worse” (Boy, 6th Year)

“To ignore the bullies and not show a reaction as bullies may lose enjoyment bullying a person, if they see the person doesn’t care. If the situation escalates, tell a trusted adult” (Boy, 2nd Year)

Among those participants who believe bullying is not so serious when it happens online, there is a minority advising to simply ignore the cyberbullying without taking further measures.

“It’s not real, turn off your phone” (Girl, 5th Year)

“Get offline. Don’t concern yourself with the opinions of strangers who don’t know you and judged you based on a thirty second clip or who just like to make shit up. They’re gonna do whatever they want because you can’t control them” (Boy, 4th Year)



Furthermore, it should be highlighted that several participants go beyond a practical recommendation to address words of support and encouragement to targets of cyberbullying, stating the victimisation is not their fault and reassuring them of their own value.

“Don't take it personally, because it's a reflection on the person who is bullying you. It really shows what's happening in their life: people who hurt other people are usually hurt themselves. There's a reason why they are doing it and it's probably nothing to do with you. They are just taking their hurt out on you, possibly because they are jealous or they think you are an easy target. Also, most people reading it will probably recognise that it isn't nice and that it's not true” (Girl, 2nd Year)

“I think the best advice would be to block the person or if in a videogame match, mute them or leave the match. It is important to remember that you are amazing and don't let what people say get to you because you are the slay, Queen” (Girl, 4th Year)

“It's not you! most bullying is more about the bully keep that in your head and tell someone” (Boy, 6th Year)


“People who write things like that on the internet don't know you. The only person who gets to decide things about you is you. Always ask for help and prioritise yourself because you don't deserve to be mistreated by anyone. Also, deleting apps may not solve the problem but it can put your mind at peace for a while” (Non-binary, 5th Year)

“Remember that these people do not care enough and are not brave enough to say anything to your face. These people don't matter and won't affect your life off the screen. If this cyberbullying is affecting your mental health or you believe you are in danger, know that you are valid and you can and should ask for help” (Girl, 4th Year)

Conclusions and Recommendations

- There is a high connectivity and digital devices usage in general, but bystanders are heavier users than their non-bystander peers. Unsurprisingly, greater involvement in the digital environment translates into greater exposure to online bullying. This also relates to participants in this study seeming to be mostly reactive when encountering cyberbullying, but not using preventive measures, such as the privacy settings to keep strangers from having access to their content and feeds. Access to the resources that the online world has to offer is a right for children, but it also entails the obligation to know how to behave responsibly towards others and avoid risks to themselves.
- Given that bystanders are present in most cyberbullying episodes and their potential role in perpetuating or ending the victimisation, intervention and prevention efforts should target them. That a large portion of participants did not report ever witnessing cyberbullying may be indicating that it may be easy to overlook or misinterpret as less severe. Besides, it is easy to scroll past or ignore. Additionally, if students see someone being cyberbullied that they do not know in person, they may be more likely to ignore the bullying while being friends with the target would prompt them to get involved (Beavon et al., 2022; DeSmet, 2016). Future antibullying programmes may want to focus on helping bystanders noticing (cyber)bullying and perceiving it as a situation that needs to be addressed given the impact it has on targets.
- Most participants were aware of the resources available to them and have even used them but did not do so to help others. Therefore, preventive efforts are not so much necessary for information purposes as they are for the willingness to get involved, promoting empathy towards targets of (cyber)bullying and countering normalisation of any kind of violence. These skills align with Social Personal and Health Education Curriculum (SPHE), making schools the perfect environment to include this kind of training.
- Schools need access to suitable and effective anti-bullying programmes, resources, and training. A number of recommended anti-bullying programmes are available to schools in Ireland; of note the research-based FUSE Anti-bullying and Online Safety programme² developed by DCU Anti-Bullying Centre. FUSE aims to build the capacity of schools themselves to tackle bullying and online safety issues and to empower children and adolescents to understand their own behaviour, be able to recognise bullying and online safety risks and be confident in how to report and seek support if required. Furthermore, Webwise will publish a new Junior Cycle Unit of Learning

² FUSE Anti-bullying & Online Safety programme. Available at <https://antibullyingcentre.ie/fuse/>



supporting the updated Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum that will take a particular focus on bystander behaviour. The unit of learning aim is to empower students to recognise and take action against online bullying, through their own positive actions and behaviours and through helping to create an anti-bullying environment on a school-wide level. It will be available to all post-primary schools in September 2023. In addition, educators can access free training and resources in Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying available from Webwise and PDST Technology in Education³.

- Social media providers can contribute on reducing cyberbullying. The mechanics of some social networking sites could be facilitating online victimisation given the higher rates found in this study of witnessing cyberbullying among those registered in some social networks in particular. This requires further research before conclusive recommendations can be made, but several students themselves called for technical improvements on social media and engagement from the providers to facilitate other people stepping in when encountering cyberbullying.
- Parents and peers play an important role in cyberbullying incidents as a source of support. Increased emphasis should be placed on a shared understanding of key messages in relation to appropriate online etiquette that complement messages students are receiving in school. This could be built in to parenting resources and awareness campaigns to educate young people on safe interventions in bullying incidents online. Such an approach would need appropriate training and resources.
- Future research should try to reach a larger number of participants and use a random sampling to generalise the quantitative results to the whole population. Besides, further qualitative research can help to better understand the dynamics that lead a bystander to intervene or not.

³ Understanding, Preventing and Responding to Cyberbullying: Free online course for educators. Available at <https://www.webwise.ie/teachers/webwise-workshops/>

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