Cyberbullying in Portuguese Schools: Prevalence and Characteristics

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# Details

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## Sample

23 Portuguese schools. A sample of 3,525 sixth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade students completed a self-response questionnaire assessing their perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying.

## Implications For Parents About

## Implications For Educators About

Other

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Creating a safe environment for children online

# Abstract

This study examined the extent and nature of cyberbullying in 23 Portuguese schools. A sample of 3,525 sixth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade students completed a self-response questionnaire assessing their perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying. The findings showed that 7.6% of students have been victimized, and 3.9% have bullied others at least once over the last year. The incidences of victimization were higher for females and for the older students. In contrast, more boys reported having bullied others in the eleventh grade. The most frequent medium of cyberbullying was via websites, whilst sending offensive messages was the most widely reported type of behavior. Telling someone about cyberbullying is among the most frequent coping strategies used by cybervictims, who usually chose to tell their friends rather than adults. Implications of these findings for students, schools, and parents are discussed.

# Outcome

The prevalence rate found for victimization was 7.6% (students who reported having been victims of cyberbullying at least once over the last year). The majority of the results are in line with previous studies carried out in Europe and in Portugal.

"With regard to the number of participants who stated that they had carried out cyberbullying, the
prevalence is lower than the victimization rate (3.9%)". These results "may be associated with bullies’ resistance to reporting a behavior that is socially disapproved (Aboujaoud et al., 2015)" (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 131).

There is an overlap between cybervictimization and cyberbullying (the bully–victims group). Students who are involved both in bullying and being bullied are a high-risk group for various problems, namely behavioral, health, and school problems. Thus, it's crucial to pay attention to this group, in order to help them find alternative forms of behavior and positive peer relationships.

"Analysis of the prevalence of cyberbullying by gender and school grade revealed a higher
percentage of female victims and a tendency for cyberbullying to increase according to school
grade and therefore age. With regard to cyberbullying others, the interaction between gender and
school grade suggests that significant gender differences are only found amongst older students, with boys in the eleventh grade more likely to be involved in cyberbullying than girls. (...) Moreover, the research findings with regard to the relationship between age and cyberbullying are not clear, although recent studies point to low rates in youngest students and a peak of involvement in seventh to tenth grades" (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 132).

"Nevertheless, the fact that victimization and cyberbullying (in the latter case, only amongst boys)
was found in our study to be more prevalent in the eleventh grade (average age 16.4) does not mean that the figures for the 6th and 8th grades are not worrying and points to the need to develop measures and projects to prevent cyberbullying as early as possible" (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 133).

In relation to the media used, the results show that websites emerge as the most commonly used
media for cyberbullying. After websites (e.g., social networking and video sharing websites), text
messages and phone calls were the forms of cyberbullying most frequently cited by students, and
MMS (picture/video clip bullying via mobile phone cameras) the least mentioned. The greater
prevalence of cyberbullying via websites identified in this study may be related to more recent
technological changes, which reflect greater access to the Internet and the growing use of social
networks via mobile devices. With regard to behavior, sending unpleasant or harmful messages to
victims and forwarding or circulating them emerge as the most common types of cyberbullying.
Denigration and revealing secrets are also cited by high percentages of victims.

"These results highlight the importance of educating students in the safe and responsible use of
ICT. Considering the greater autonomy of young people in using media, resulting from the diversity
of locations and devices of Internet access, raising awareness of the characteristics of online
communication, of the fact that anonymity may be an illusion, and that in the other side of the
screen there are real people, who suffer and feel real pain, may contribute to prevent cyberbullying" (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 133).

"The findings regarding the identity of aggressors, namely the large number of victims who did not
know who the aggressor was, show the significant impact that cyberbullying may have on victims,
due to the vulnerable situation in which they find themselves when they do not know the identity of
the aggressor. However, a high percentage of victims (39.3%) said that the bullies were classmates,
although this rate is lower than the 76.1% found by Ventura (2011). These findings call for reflection both on the role of the school and for developing initiatives within the school community to prevent cyberbullying. However, the fact that cyberbullying may occur 24 hours a day and 7 days a week indicates that the initiatives required to combat this problem, although based on, or promoted within, the specific context of formal or informal education do not preclude the involvement of families" (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 133-34).

Technological strategies, considered reactive coping strategies aimed at putting an end to the aggression and preventing the negative impact of cyberbullying, were the most frequent ways of coping with cyberbullying. Adopting a passive strategy, such as doing nothing, is also widely cited.
Aggressive coping strategies are cited by lower percentages of students. Talking to the bully and becoming more careful were also mentioned by high percentages of students and, as active strategies which help reduce the possibilities of being victimized again.
Social strategies, consisting to a large extent of telling someone what has happened, are cited by varying percentages of victims, according to whether they involve telling friends (35.9%), parents (27%), or teachers (9.3%). It is more common for victims to ask for help from friends than adults.
The last two strategies were considered affective in preventing cyberbulling by previous studies. Asking the question about "to what extent would you ask for help to your parents", as an hypothesis, increased this category's expression in a Portuguese prior study (perceptions are different than action).

Accordingly, victims’ answers in the present study contrast with the responses given by students
when asked whom victims should go to for help, since almost 89.7% of the participants stated parents, 51% teachers, 49.3% the police, and only 23.2% school friends.

"The results of this study have important implications and demonstrate the need for parents and
schools to join forces in developing a concerted approach to the problem. Establishing and maintaining open channels of communication between school and family would appear to be fundamental". (Matos, A.; Vieira, C.; Amado, J.; Pessoa, T.; Martins, M., 2018: 135).